

# The Toughest of Loves: Toward a Neo-Nyssen Model of Severe Divine Punishment

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**ABSTRACT:** Some Christian theologians and philosophers maintain that God’s punishments are always (at least partly) motivated by redemptive love for those punished, even when these punishments are considerably severe (e.g., killings or damnations). However, advocates of such a conception of divine punishment face significant challenges. Perhaps most fundamentally, it is not entirely apparent how severe and loving features of divine punishment might be understood to fit together within a viable theological model. In this article this foundational issue is addressed. By culling resources from St. Gregory of Nyssa, the present aim is to proffer a contemporary model of divine punishment that naturally combines redemptive love for its subjects with apparently harsh penal treatment of them.

The Apostle Paul tells Christians to take note of “the kindness and severity of God,” who is at once willing to forgive the repentant and to punish the rebellious sternly (Rom 11:22).<sup>1</sup> This basic depiction of the divine character seems apt from a broadly traditional Christian perspective. On the one hand, God loves humans to the point of being willing to become one of them and die a brutal criminal’s death to redeem them. On the other hand, there are various biblical portrayals of God striking people dead for their misdeeds (e.g., Acts 12:23) and even apparently casting them into hell (e.g., Matt. 25:31–46). Hence, the Christian God appears to be unsurpassably loving, yet willing to punish those who sin in strong, seemingly harsh, ways.

Notwithstanding the ostensibly severe punitive action on the part of God, many Christian theologians maintain that divine punishment is always ultimately motivated by love, including love for the one punished. St. Gregory of Nyssa is a paradigmatic representative of this perspective. Although he is willing to compare God’s punishment to “knives, cauteries, and bitter medicines,” Gregory insists that this punishment, even that which takes place in hell, is a “healing remedy provided by God” that is motivated by “the noble end of the love of man” (*Cat. Or.* 8.10 and 26.2; Hardy 1954, 284 and 303, respectively).<sup>2</sup> For him, divine punishment, although sometimes considerably severe, is always guided by redemptive love for those punished.

Those who wish to follow individuals such as Gregory in maintaining a place for severe yet loving divine punishments face significant conceptual challenges.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps most fundamentally, it is not entirely apparent how severe and loving features of divine punishment might be understood to fit together within a viable theological model.<sup>4</sup> In this article this foundational issue is addressed. By culling resources from Gregory, the present aim is to

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical citations are from the NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> All quotes from Gregory of Nyssa’s *Catechetical Oration* are taken from Hardy (1954) and will be abbreviated as *Cat. Or.* All Greek text is taken from Mühlenberg (2000).

<sup>3</sup> For this and other insightful objections, see Ludlow (2000a, 94–112).

<sup>4</sup> This seems to be a central point made by Ludlow (2000b, 465–467).

proffer a contemporary model of divine punishment that naturally combines redemptive love for its subjects with apparently harsh penal treatment of them.<sup>5</sup>

## 1. Gregory's Account of Divine Punishment

As indicated, some theologians wish to affirm that love always is God's ultimate (or fundamentally driving) motivation for punishing individuals or else always rests among God's ultimate motivations for so acting. In other words, if one were to ask why God punishes some person, the final and most satisfying explanation would include an appeal to how this punitive action achieves some loving end and/or expresses some loving divine attitude. Clearly, there are a number of ways in which such loving divine punishment might be conceptualized. To mention just a few options, one might hold that God's love and punishment are fundamentally unified in that God's punishments exemplify love for the victims of evil,<sup>6</sup> or love for Himself (e.g., His honor or glory),<sup>7</sup> or love for those who might be tempted toward evil or potentially victimized by it.<sup>8</sup> Beyond these options, one might seek to understand the interrelation between God's love and penalization as it principally pertains to God's alleged visitations of calamity on entire people groups (e.g., the killing of the firstborn children of Egypt or the Israelite conquest of Canaan) rather than primarily in terms of God's punishments of individuals for their personal failings.<sup>9</sup> Each of these issues concerning the relationship between God's love and penal action certainly merits serious attention, and it might turn out that they are all intertwined at the roots. Nevertheless, inquiry into these topics must be set aside for present purposes. The goal here is to provide a paradigm for understanding God's punishment of individuals for their (personal) misdeeds, especially when this punishment is thought to be severe yet redemptively loving *for the one being punished*. To achieve this goal, reflections from Gregory of Nyssa will serve as our point of departure.<sup>10</sup>

One of the most insightful places in which Gregory discusses the nature of divine punishment is the *Catechetical Oration*. What is specifically noteworthy is the section of this essay that concerns the legitimacy of God's deceit of the devil. According to Gregory, God offers Christ to Satan in exchange for human souls. This exchange involves deception on God's part, though, whereby God deliberately hides Christ's divinity from Satan so that he accepts Christ as a ransom. In Gregory's words, "God, in order to make himself easily accessible [to Satan] who sought the ransom for us, veiled himself in our nature. In that way, as it is with greedy fish, he might swallow the Godhead like a fishhook along with the flesh, which was the bait" (*Cat. Or.*, 24.4; Hardy 1954, 301). The taking of this bait leads to Satan's undoing, however, since Satan gave away human souls only to discover that he is unable to destroy or subjugate the divinity that resides in Christ's human flesh that he sought to devour.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of theological modeling that mirrors my own purposes here, see Crisp (2021, 9–19).

<sup>6</sup> Relevant here is Psalm 35:1–28 as well as Cone (2010, 89–97).

<sup>7</sup> Relevant here is St. Anselm of Canterbury (*Cur Deus Homo*, Book I, chapters 12–14; cf. *Proslogion*, chapters 8–11) and Jonathan Edwards (see his sermon, "Wicked Men Useful in their Destruction Only"). For an informative treatment of why Edwards maintains that God punishes in hell, see Holmes (2000, 389–403).

<sup>8</sup> In some places this is found in Lactantius (1886, chs. 8, 11–12, 16–17, and 20). Such a claim is explicitly affirmed by White (1712, 187–188) (cited by Ludlow 2000b, 453) and would also seem to be a main conclusion of Lane's fine essay (2001, 138–67).

<sup>9</sup> A comprehensive survey of such works can be found in Boyd's two-volume book (2017).

<sup>10</sup> Much of the following section builds upon Wessling (2017, 433–436).

Gregory's depiction of God's deception of the devil via the fishhook metaphor is not always treated as a form of divine punishment by contemporary interpreters.<sup>11</sup> This is an oversight, in my view. The metaphor of a divine fishhook baited with the flesh of Christ was a widely used trope in Christian antiquity (see Conostas 2004, 147). The image was drawn from a theologically rich reading of various biblical passages, including Job 40–41 and Isa 27:1, which concern the ability of God alone to subdue and defeat the Leviathan. The idea in Isa 27:1, which is the text that most naturally lends itself to Christological interpretation, seems clearly to be that the mighty cosmic dragon, the Leviathan, will be punished by God.<sup>12</sup> Given this backdrop, it is not a great stretch to suppose that Gregory would similarly understand God's deception of Satan in punitive terms. More significantly, though, Gregory expressly ties the deception of the devil to a kind of commensurate punitive justice from God. For example, in explaining why it is just for God to deceive Satan by hiding Christ's true nature from him, Gregory (*Cat. Or.*, 26.2–3; Hardy 1954, 303) states that “it is the character of justice to render to each his due” (*Δικαίον μὲν γὰρ ἐστὶ τὸ κατ' ἄξιαν ἐκάστω νέμειν*) and that “[j]ustice is evident in the rendering of due recompense, by which the deceiver was in turn deceived” (*Ἡ μὲν γὰρ τοῦ κατ' ἄξιαν ἀντιδοσὶς δι' ἧς ὁ ἀπατεῶν ἀνταπατᾶται τὸ δίκαιον δείκνυσιν*). Through this deception, moreover, “the divine power acts like fire and effects the disappearance [*ἀφανισμόν*]” of the “corruption, darkness, and other offshoots of vice [that] have attached themselves” to Satan (*Cat. Or.*, 26.7 Hardy 1954, 303–304). Such language indicates that Gregory has in mind a kind of punitive justice according to which the great deceiver deserves to be deceived in the manner that God does with Christ.<sup>13</sup> In keeping with this, Morwenna Ludlow (2000a, 84–85) correctly underscores that Gregory, on the heels of the fishhook metaphor within the *Catechetical Oration*, explicitly links God's purifying punishment of the “author of evil” (i.e., Satan) with God's more general form of punishment (see *Cat. Or.*, 26.7; Hardy 1954, 303–304).<sup>14</sup> The idea, in other words, is that Gregory sees God's deceptive treatment of Satan in this instance as an application of God's more general policy of punishing by purifying means. Finally, Gregory concludes the section on why God is justified in deceiving the devil by stating that “all creation” will one day reach a thankful and redeemed state, “both those whose purification has involved punishment [*καθάρσει κεκολασμένων*] and those who never needed purification at all” (*Cat. Or.*, 26.8; Hardy 1954, 304). Satan clearly belongs within the former punitive category, and, I submit, Gregory takes himself to have just presented one way in which this punitive purification of Satan might take place.

<sup>11</sup> However, to be clear, I know of no interpreter of Gregory that denies such a connection to divine punishment either.

<sup>12</sup> The updated version of the NRSV translates the Hebrew of Isa 27:1 as follows: “On that day the LORD with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish [MT: *yipqōd*] Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea.” The Septuagint (the version of the Old Testament that was read by Gregory and his influences) is not quite as explicit, since *κολάζω* and other common Greek words for punishment and like notions are not to be found. However, when Isa 27:1 is read together with the immediately prior verse, 26:21, we clearly get the idea that the dragon is being destroyed as part of an outpouring of divine wrath. Hence, it seems inescapable that the Septuagint likewise depicts God as punishing the cosmic dragon.

<sup>13</sup> More clearly, the claim is that Gregory here sees God's punishment of Satan as but one application of divine justice, the latter of which encompasses much more than mere punishment.

<sup>14</sup> It should be underscored that Ludlow does not *argue* that Gregory's depiction of God's deception of the devil ought to be treated as a form of divine punishment. Rather, Ludlow seems to assume that this text so clearly includes divine punishment of Satan that it can be used to support other claims about Gregory's conception of divine punishment.

How, then, might such divine deceptive punishment be justified? Gregory's answer to this question contains a compelling mixture of both retributivist and redemptive elements. While retributivism itself comes in many different shades, it might be described as the perspective that punishment is justified (in part or whole) because the guilty (and only the guilty) deserve hard-treatment for their wrongs, and that there is something intrinsically good about proportionately punishing those who deserve it.<sup>15</sup> Gregory almost certainly assumes retributivism of some kind, although he does not exactly state the view as characterized. His implicit commitment to retributivism is made evident in Gregory's depiction of God's deception of Satan as a just punitive return of "like for like" (*ὁμοίων ἀντιδόσεως*) on account of Satan's misdeeds (*Cat. Or.*, 26.3; cf. 26.4; Hardy 1954, 303). Since Satan is the father of lies, he deserves to feel the pain of being deceived about that which he holds dear. Nevertheless, Gregory is clear that divine punishment must "not exclude [the] higher aim" (*μὴ ἐκπεσεῖν τοῦ βελτίονος*) of love (*Cat. Or.*, 26.3; Hardy 1954, 303; cf. *Cat. Or.*, 26.2, 26.4–8, 8.1–20). So, in God's punitive treatment of Satan, God must deceive Satan in a way that is potentially good for him.

Part of Gregory's framework as to how some good for Satan can be procured in God's deceptive act involves the idea that any contact with God-in-Christ, including Satan's contact, has salubrious effects (e.g., *Cat. Or.*, 26.6–7; Hardy 1954, 303–304).<sup>16</sup> But, more importantly for present purposes, Gregory holds that God's punishment of Satan is communicative and potentially remedial. For Gregory believes that the deception of the master of deception is a form of punishment that powerfully communicates to Satan the nature of his wrongdoing, so that Satan might repent of his sins and ultimately be restored to God. Gregory writes,

[T]he deceiver was in turn deceived. . . . By the principle of justice the deceiver reaps the harvest of the seeds he sowed with his own free will. For he who first deceived man by the bait of pleasure is himself deceived by the camouflage of human nature. But the purpose of the action changes it into something good. For the one practiced deceit to ruin our nature; but the other [i.e., God], being at once just and good and wise, made use of a deceitful device to save the one who had been ruined [*ἐπὶ σωτηρίᾳ τοῦ καταφθαρέντος*]. And by so doing he benefited, not only the one who had perished, but also the very one who had brought us ruin [i.e., Satan]. . . . Hence not even the adversary himself can question that what occurred was just and salutary—if, that is, he comes to recognize its benefit (*Cat. Or.*, 26.3, 26.4–5, 26.7; Hardy 1954, 303–304).

Nicholas Constanas contends that Gregory echoes a theme in classical antiquity, whereby "the use of deception was sanctioned as an acceptable pedagogical, strategic, and therapeutic device" (2004, 142). Since Gregory was embedded within this cultural milieu, Constanas observes that in Gregory's mind "it was only right that an act of deception should be undone by an act of deception," but that "God's deceit, unlike the devil's, was enacted for therapeutic purposes," ultimately to "redeem the [evil] desire of the other" (2004, 145). Thus, one finds here a redemptive component to Gregory's understanding of punishment. Yes, Satan deserves to be deceived for his deceptions. But, importantly, God's use of deception is intended to communicate holistically to Satan the error of his ways, so that he might repent and benefit

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., the opening paragraph of Walen (2021).

<sup>16</sup> On this, see Emerson (1998); Ludlow (2007, ch. 6); and Ramelli (2013, 416–24).

from the saving work of Christ.<sup>17</sup> In this manner, God's punitive wrath turns out to be a facet of His love.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, Gregory's notion that God would ever deceive has been roundly criticized.<sup>19</sup> However, Jeffrey Fisher and Kyle Kirchoff (2016) have creatively defended Gregory's argument.<sup>20</sup> The heart of their case traces back to Nyssen's understanding of the root of personal sin. When Satan fell into sin, he freely chose (like humans after him) to turn his faculties of reason away from the truth of God and His good ways ("closed [his] eyes to the good and the generous," *Cat Or.* 6.7; Hardy 1954, 280) in submission to irrational impulses. But submitting one's rational faculties to irrational impulses in order to chase one's desires, when one thinks this should not be done, amounts to a kind of self-deception and makes one susceptible to beliefs and behaviors that are out of step with the truth of God and His good ways. Furthermore, Satan's reoccurring pattern of this form of self-deception has made Satan the sin-imprisoned and deluded individual that he is.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Fisher and Kirchoff write, "Gregory's account of Satan's fall into self-delusion and self-aggrandizement (in effect, the same thing) . . . implies that the most serious obstacle to reconciliation with God may in fact be stubborn refusal to acknowledge the truth" (2016, 86). Yet God provides Satan with an opportunity to be freed from his self-deluded enslavement not by lying to Satan *per se*, but by providing a context, via the sending of Christ whose identity is partly concealed, in which God knows that Satan will deceive himself once again. Satan deceives himself by believing he can thwart God's purposes by capturing God's Christ, the truth of whose nature Satan refused to examine. But when Satan discovers the divinity of Christ, who cannot be held captive, Satan is forced to confront his character and the fruitlessness of his pervasive deceptions. By providing this illuminating experience, God invites Satan to repent of his sins and embrace the healing succor of the resurrected Christ.

Building upon the groundwork laid by Fisher and Kirchoff, the redemptive aspect of God's deception of Satan might be framed as follows. When Satan seized Christ, he fooled himself into believing that he had finally frustrated the plans of God, perhaps even to the point of sensing the beginnings of a cosmic victory over God. But just when the diabolical bliss reaches its zenith, Satan discovers that he had unwittingly inaugurated God's kingdom, by helping God complete His most central saving act, and inadvertently toppled his own. The results are at once humiliating and devastating. Satan experiences palpably his own inevitable final defeat. Yet when confronted with the resurrected Christ, Satan is not given the sword. Rather, Christ extends forgiveness and invites Satan to share in his own deifying life, if only Satan will humbly receive it.

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<sup>17</sup> See Mateo-Seco (2010, 225–226).

<sup>18</sup> For discussions of those who held a pedagogical understanding of punishment and likely influenced Gregory, see Daley (1991, 85–86), Ramelli (2013, 373–440), and Sachs (1993, 617–640).

<sup>19</sup> For a long list of individuals who object to this feature of Gregory's argument, see Constat (2004, 145–146).

<sup>20</sup> It should be mentioned that Fisher and Kirchoff (2016, 86) contend that Gregory eschews violence for the sake of redemption. However, it is easy to take this interpretation of Gregory too far. The texts Fisher and Kirchoff cite from *Cat. Or.*, which concern God honoring certain just rules with Satan, do not demonstrate that God would not in other contexts use forceful penalties, perhaps even violent ones on some definitions, that have the capacity to redeem.

<sup>21</sup> Fisher and Kirchoff (2016, 89) note that it is not clear if Satan's first sinful act by itself imprisons Satan in sin or whether Satan's bondage to sin is the result of a reoccurring pattern of self-deceptive acts. I have chosen the latter interpretation since I think it is intrinsically more plausible, dovetails with Gregory's emphasis on the value of creaturely freedom (see, e.g., *Cat Or.* 6.5), and seems to align better with Gregory's apparent conviction that Satan can, and indeed will, be saved (see, e.g., *Cat. Or.*, 26.7–8 and *Making of Man*, 21–22).

Undoubtedly, some will remain unconvinced that God, under any plausible description, would ever deceive. But leaving that issue aside (as well as the details of Gregory's alleged atonement theory), we can abstract from Gregory a kind of painful retributivist, like-for-like punishment that also has potentially redemptive features built into it. These redemptive features have to do with turning the wrongdoer's sins back on her in some way, so that she is both confronted with her wrongdoing and invited into the process of spiritual change. Such a redemptive form of punishment makes sense given the source of individual sin provided by Gregory: when people sin, they reorient their inner gaze away from God and His good ways, which leads to a kind of enslavement to beliefs and behaviors that are contrary to God (*Cat. Or.* 5-6; Hardy 1954, 277–278). For present purposes, this reorientation of one's inner gaze may be understood along Platonic or intellectualist lines in which sin or wrongdoing is the result of a species of ignorance.<sup>22</sup> Alternatively, and perhaps preferably, it may be understood in terms of a kind of active suppression or avoidance of an awareness of some good.<sup>23</sup> (Think Romans 1:25: "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!") Regardless, if sin consists of turning one's inner gaze away from God and the good, then surely refusing or neglecting to repent likewise involves the misdirection of one's inner gaze, since such a refusal or neglect is also sinful. God's punishments, therefore, may be used to redirect the sinner's inner gaze upon her own wrongdoing and its effects in the service of providing a context in which the sinner may take ownership of her transgressions and repent.

To repeat, Gregory makes it plain that he does not think that this retributivist yet redemptive form of punishment only applies to God's treatment of Satan. Rather, Gregory explicitly associates the form of punishment given to Satan with that which will be administered to those humans who require it (e.g., *Cat. Or.*, 26.7; Hardy 1954, 303–304). As such, Gregory's passage on the deceit of the devil contains a framework for thinking about God's punishment more generally, even if Gregory did not intend to present God's deception of Satan as the sole guiding example of how God punishes.<sup>24</sup>

## 2. Augmenting Gregory's Account with Contemporary Resources

At first blush, Gregory provides a promising understanding of divine punishment for those who place a premium on God's sometimes stern but always all-inclusive love. This is not to say that Gregory's conception of divine punishment is without shortcomings, however. Morwenna Ludlow, for instance, raises a number of insightful worries (2000a, 94–112). Among these is that Gregory's conception of divine punishment radically limits creaturely freedom of choice, despite Gregory's own commitment to the value of such freedom. This limitation seems especially pronounced when considered in conjunction with Gregory's apparent commitment to the teaching of apocatastasis. For where is there room for creaturely freedom if divine punishment is eventually always successful? The place of human freedom

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<sup>22</sup> Gregory is interpreted along these Platonic or intellectualist lines by Ramelli (2013, 123–124, 178, 272, 305–306), and Ludlow (2000a, 102–104) discusses the theological implications of such a reading of Gregory.

<sup>23</sup> Green (2019, 56–57) registers doubt about the intellectualist interpretation of Gregory.

<sup>24</sup> For further commentary on Gregory's general way of conceiving of divine redemptive punishment, see Daley (1991, 88–9), Sachs (1993, 632–638), and Ludlow (2000a, 86, 94–112). Ludlow's work, in particular, underscores apparent internal tensions within Gregory's thinking on divine punishment.

within Gregory's punitive structure is further called into question when we focus on the frightening metaphors Gregory uses to describe divine punishment (e.g., knives and fire). The human frame can only bear so much. Hence, punishments that are too severe break the human spirit and make subservient compliance inevitable. Yet Gregory is clear that God's punishment often generates "unspeakable pangs" for its subjects (*Cat. Or.*, 8.12; Hardy 1954, 285). Moving slightly beyond Ludlow's criticisms, there remains the more fundamental challenge of articulating how, precisely, the redemptive and retributive components of Gregory's understanding of divine punishment fit together in a cohesive and theologically satisfactory manner.<sup>25</sup>

Previously (Wessling 2017, 433–442; Wessling 2019; and Wessling 2020, 207–218), I sought to meet some of these challenges by appealing to the contemporary philosopher of criminal punishment, R.A. Duff, and his communicative model of how the state should punish. Duff reasons that criminal punishment "should communicate to offenders the censure they deserve for their crimes and should aim through the communicative process to persuade them to repent [of] those crimes, to try to reform themselves, and thus to reconcile themselves with those whom they have wronged" (Duff 2001, xvii). Seeing communicative elements in Gregory's account of divine punishment, I intentionally extracted Gregory's basic divine penal account from much of Gregory's wider thought. I then turned to Duff's work on criminal punishment as a way of fleshing out Gregory's basic view in certain respects, in the hope that the resulting conception of divine punishment would constitute a viable contemporary model.

One aspect of Duff's account that I seized upon is the extraordinary manner in which Duff combines both retributivism and reformatory aims (e.g., Wessling 2017, 437–438). Duff's view of criminal punishment is retributivist in that stern communicative treatment is understood as an intrinsically good and justified response to an individual's past failings—punitive censure is what the offender deserves. However, unlike standard retributivists, Duff (2001, 106–115) maintains that punishment should aim to persuade the wrongdoer to repent, reform, and seek reconciliation between the wrongdoer and her victim (as appropriate), and, ideally, the community affected by the wrongdoer's actions. But, crucially, Duff's use of a reformatory component differs from the characteristic way in which this component is conceived. Those who stress criminal reform and perhaps accompanying deterrence as important goals of punishment often claim that it is the contingently related output of these goals that justifies the means. Against this, Duff maintains that it is the holistic communication of punishment that is intrinsically appropriate. Punishment puts the transgressor's heart and mind in contact with the values he has flouted, while also directing his gaze toward the way of change and restoration. The communicative content by itself, and not so much the outcomes, is a worthwhile endeavor that warrants punishment. It is important for Duff that criminal punishment is utilized in a manner that respects the moral agency of offenders who may freely refuse to accept the message of punishment. When the message of punishment is denied, the punishment remains justified since it treats transgressors as rational and moral individuals who are worth engaging through communicative treatment, even if stern and unpleasant.

Interestingly, Duff presents his account of criminal punishment as a secular species of penance. It is said to be so in that it forces offenders to go through a process that would, in principle, demonstrate repentance alongside the quest for reform and appropriate reconciliation. Such punishment might include meeting with a probation officer to discuss one's crimes and the path to change, a forced ceremonial apology (whether heartfelt or not), and some form of reparation to those wronged.

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<sup>25</sup> Relevant is Ludlow (2000b, 465–467), although she does not focus on Gregory in this context.

In my previous work, I maintained that Duff's penitential view of criminal punishment can be assimilated with only slight modification into Gregory's general framework for divine punishment. The resulting basic account was that God punishes sinners to communicate to them the censure they deserve, so that they might repent, begin reform with God's help, and (as appropriate) reconcile themselves with those whom they have wronged. Here the idea was that punitive success is not essentially dependent upon the change of sinners but on the punishment's intrinsic communicative effectiveness. It is the kind of punishment that provides a context in which transgressors can, if they allow it, profoundly discern the depth of their sins and understand how they should respond to the fact that they have committed these evils.<sup>26</sup>

I now believe this previous effort to construct a kind of neo-Nyssen<sup>27</sup> and communicative account of divine punishment was only partially successful. First, I think it should be granted that there is something almost irresistible about assimilating a penitential version of punishment (such as Duff's) into a theory of divine punishment. If nothing else, such a theory provides a foundation for thinking that the church becomes a vehicle for loving, though unpleasant, divine punishment.<sup>28</sup> Second, I remain convinced that the fuller, Duff-inspired version of divine communicative punishment that I offered preserves human freedom better than does the bare Nyssen alternative (see Wessling 2017, 441–442). This is because the former rightly underscores that divine punitive success does not depend upon the actualization of genuine repentance and reform but upon appropriate communicative delivery. God can punish effectively without sinners responding as God would like to the deserved censure received. Hence, there apparently is space for creatures freely to decide how they wish to respond to God's punitive messages. But, it should be said, conceiving of divine punishment in this manner likely means abandoning Gregory's ostensible commitment to apocatastasis in favor of something closer to a *hopeful universalism*.<sup>29</sup> Finally, thinking of God's punishment in terms of communication, rather than in terms of pedagogy as is so often done by those who stress divine remedial penalization, furnishes a fruitful way of conceiving of a neo-Nyssen model of divine punishment. For, arguably, rarely does sin fundamentally have to do with gaps in moral knowledge or mistakes in moral reasoning. Quite the contrary, sinners often know, or at least sense, that their behavior is wrong. Better, it might be said, for punishment to create a communicative context in which sinners are forced to grapple with their (known or sensed) offenses as previously described in relation to Gregory's example of the devil's punishment.

On the other hand, my previous model of divine punishment does not satisfactorily show how severe divine punishments, such as the killing of individuals found in Scripture, fit within the Gregory- and Duff-inspired structure I discuss. I did, I believe, successfully provide examples in which striking people dead and even maiming them can be powerfully and redemptively communicative, which was meant to indicate that God too probably can use

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<sup>26</sup> Some might criticize the method within Wessling (2017) inasmuch as it assumes that the theologian can lift a framework of concepts from an ancient individual's more comprehensive system of thought without radically disfiguring that which is removed. (Rea (2009, 21–22) perceptively highlights this assumption as a feature of much analytic philosophy/theology, which is not shared by some theologians and philosophers operating from within other intellectual traditions). Be that as it may, this is a risk that those engaged in the project of theological retrieval must often take, and I find the potential reward well worth the risk. (Discussions of theological retrieval can be found in Buschart and Eilers (2015), Crisp (2010), and Webster (2007).)

<sup>27</sup> I have chosen to use the label "neo-Nyssen" rather than the otherwise preferable "neo-Gregorian" to designate the individual, from the many exceptional Gregorians, who has influenced of model of divine punishment defended within this article.

<sup>28</sup> Of course, such a view also comes with a danger. Believing that one is acting on behalf of God sets the stage for all manner of corruption.

<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the most influential proponent of "hopeful universalism" is Hans Urs von Balthasar (2014).



harsh forms of punishment as effective vehicles of redemptive communication. However, the examples of severe but lovingly redemptive punishment proffered run contrary to some of the specifics of Duff's account which were intended to prop up my model of divine communicative punishment. According to Duff, punishment should communicate the censure deserved and this, as we have seen, he spells out in terms of a kind of secular penance. I affirmed the value of penance within my own theory (although I did not stress it to the same degree as Duff does), but then I left it behind when treating the issue of apparently harsh divine punishments. In its place, I presented examples in which wrongdoers are punitively forced to undergo experiences that mirror the harm they have caused. This latter communicative emphasis is arguably closer to Gregory's understanding of punishment, but I seem to have inadvertently fallen back into this understanding without then explaining how it should be taken up into the larger Duff-inspired model of divine communicative punishment that I offered. The ambiguity is compounded by the reality that I left unaddressed the fact that Duff (2001, 143–146) expressly distances himself from the notion that punishment should principally involve imposing on perpetrators the wrongs they have caused. As a result, a shadow is cast over the details of my former proposal.

### 3. Retooling Gregory's Account Once Again

Contemporary interpreters of Gregory seem not to have noticed, or otherwise have left unpronounced, a facet of Gregory's thinking about divine punishment. This is that Gregory couples divine reformatory penal features not merely with retribution generally but with something like the *lex talionis*. It will be recalled that the *lex talionis* states that "you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" (Exod 21:23–25; cf. Lev 24:18–20; Deut. 19:21). Although there is no shortage of controversy concerning the meaning and theological function of the *lex talionis*, Pamela Barmash notes that it expresses a principle of penal symmetry, a repaying in kind: "The act of punishment must be similar to the offense in the aspects in which the original act was wrong. In a sense, it is a reversal of roles: The original agent of harm becomes the recipient of the same action of the type that constituted the offense" (Barmash 2005, 157–158). So far as I am aware, Gregory only ever alludes to biblical manifestations of the talionic principle in connection to the notion that Christians are not to act according to it on account of Christ's command to love (*à la* Matt 5:38–48).<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, it is well known that Gregory regularly aims to avoid attributing apparently unjust and cruel actions to God.<sup>31</sup> But neither of these considerations contradict the notion that Gregory in effect affirms that God may judiciously act in accordance with the talionic principle, as defined by Barmash, to instantiate redemptive love. On the contrary, there is a case to be made that this principle rests beneath the surface of Gregory's understanding of divine punishment.

As intimated already, Gregory puts something very much like the talionic principle to work in his account of God's deception of Satan. We see this when Gregory explains why justice moves God to deceive the father of lies: "Justice is evident in the rendering of due recompense, by which the deceiver was in turn deceived" (*Cat. Or.* 26.3; Hardy 1954, 303). Elsewhere, in a sermon on the resurrection, Gregory speaks of God's deception of Satan as "turning back

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Gregory's allusion to the idea that he is obliged to love, not hate, his enemies in *Against Eunomius*, Book 1, Section 9.

<sup>31</sup> See Gregory's *Life of Moses*, Book 2, 89–85 (Ferguson and Malherbe 1978, 75–76).

upon him his clever devices” (Gebhardt 1967, 280–281). In these descriptions, the deception of the great deceiver is a striking example of the kind of reversal of roles that is essential to the *lex talionis* as characterized by Barmash. More generally, Gregory maintains that “it is the mark of justice to render to everyone the results of what he originally planted, just as the earth yields fruit according to the types of seed shown.” In doing so, justice “returns like for like” (*Cat. Or.* 26.3; Hardy 1954, 303).<sup>32</sup> Hence, the parallels between the talionic principle and Gregory’s conceptualization of God’s punishment are difficult to miss.

It merits seeing, moreover, just how far the talionic principle will take us toward the construction of a neo-Nyssen model of divine communicative punishment. Arguably, this remains a worthwhile exploration even if we conclude that the *lex talionis* ought to play little-to-no role in the Christian conception of how humans or the state should punish. God, after all, is plausibly thought to be able to punish in ways that humans ought not (*à la* Rom 12:17–19).

To begin the investigation into the talionic model of divine communicative punishment, we start with an abiding problem for the talionic law of retaliation within the human context. The problem concerns the principle’s application. Interpreted literally, the *lex talionis* seems unspeakably cruel. Are we really to maim and take the eyes of those who do similarly? And what are we to do with perpetrators of sexual assault? The answer simply cannot be to have them sexually assaulted! Alternatively, the principle seems to leave us without much guidance when taken non-literally. What we then have amounts to little more than a vague principle that punishments ought to be proportionate to the wrongs committed. So, on either interpretation, the *lex talionis* does not seem to be of much practical help (beyond, perhaps, serving to preclude disproportionately extreme punishments).<sup>33</sup> Presumably, this difficulty of application would similarly hamper the use of the *lex talionis* for understanding divine punishment: the principle would either render our conception of divine punishment much too cruel or leave us without much insight into divine punishment.

The philosopher Jeremy Waldron (1992) may help us overcome, or at least diminish, this challenge to the *lex talionis*. He interprets the talionic principle as indicating that the wrongdoer’s punishment should “possess some or all of the characteristics that made the offense wrong” (Waldron 1992, 35). To understand how such punishment might work, Waldron distinguishes between the deontic features of an offense and its badness.<sup>34</sup> The deontic features of an offense concern what makes the act unlawful, or wrong, or vicious, and like concepts. With slight amendment for present purposes, the badness of an offense refers to those features included in or caused by the relevant act upon which the deontic features of the offense at least partly supervene (i.e., those negative characteristics of a state of affairs or act that factor into making it unlawful, or wrong, or vicious, etc. to bring about the relevant state of affairs or perform the relevant act, perhaps by the relevant individual and/or with the relevant motives and/or in the relevant circumstance). For example, stealing may include the deprivation of someone’s resources, which constitutes the badness of the offense, at the hands of another who is not entitled to these resources, which constitutes the deontic violation of

<sup>32</sup> In *The Soul and the Resurrection* (Roth 1993, 84–85), Gregory contends that God visits painful, even torturous, punishments on sinners which correspond to the depth of a person’s demerit. Although Gregory provides considerably less illustrative detail about like-for-like penalization in this work, sobering language of severe punishments that correspond to the degree of wrongdoing certainly resonates with the *lex talionis*.

<sup>33</sup> See (Marshall 2001, 78–84) on the biblical role of the *lex talionis* to limit revenge and disproportionate punishments.

<sup>34</sup> More accurately, Waldron distinguishes between an offense’s deontic features and its features of wrongness (1992, 34). But it is perhaps a touch clearer to distinguish these features as stated presently.

the act. Waldron (1992, 32–37) contends that talionic punishment should subject the offender to some or all of the badness of the offense without reproducing that which violates the relevant deontic norms. He furthermore underscores that the badness of an offense may be defined by a sliding scale of general and specific features (e.g., from the death of a human to the death of a human via a semiautomatic rifle), and, for determining punishment, Waldron maintains that the *lex talionis* instructs us to do our best to select the most general (or universal or foundational) and significant features that render an act bad. Additionally, Waldron utilizes two considerations for selecting those features of badness that may be visited on the wrongdoer punitively. These include the notion that we ought to select those features of badness that best serve the reasons for punishment (e.g., communication) as well as the idea that additional moral norms should inform how the wrongdoer is punitively treated (Waldron 1992, 30–33 and 36–42, respectively).

Consider the following illustration of these principles from Waldron. Suppose someone murders another with a legally purchased firearm. The proponent of the *lex talionis* would then say that this offender should be subjected to some or all of the badness of her offense by the appropriate authority. But what fundamentally makes this violation bad, and what are its deontic features that render it wrong? In at least some circumstances we may plausibly assume that what makes it bad is the death of a human before her natural time, which ends her goals, projects, and joys she extracts from this life. Given this, what plausibly makes it wrong is that one has no right to take an innocent person's life against her will. Does this imply that the proponent of the *lex talionis* is committed to the idea that the appropriate authority should or may subject the wrongdoer to capital punishment (death before her natural time)? Not necessarily. As Waldron observes, this depends upon the relevant authority's reasons for punishing as well as the other moral considerations at hand. If one maintains that the sole reason for punishment is to give offenders what they deserve and one believes there is nothing impermissible about killing murderous offenders, then the *lex talionis* plausibly implies capital punishment. However, if one thinks that a function of punishment is to communicate to offenders in a way that may potentially reform, then capital punishment may be precluded. One might additionally think that humans have an inalienable right not to be killed (at least when feasibly avoidable) and that visiting capital punishment on offenders has an outweighing morally corrosive or hardening effect on executioners and the societies that practice it. For those who think accordingly, the *lex talionis* might move them to consider other features of a murder's badness (for example, it disrupts the victim's projects and plans and robs her of time with loved ones) that may be visited upon the murderer by long-term imprisonment instead of capital punishment.<sup>35</sup> The upshot is that the *lex talionis*, as presented by Waldron, states that offenders should be subjected to some or all of the badness of their offenses, but that there are a host of considerations that factor into determining which features of any given offense ought to be visited upon the offender.<sup>36</sup>

If we opt for Waldron's way of conceiving of the *lex talionis*, it seems that the aforementioned problem of the principle necessarily having cruel implications is evaded. For one can utilize the kinds of considerations presented to avoid saying, for example, that maimers ought to be maimed or that rapists ought to be sexually assaulted. But does Waldron's

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<sup>35</sup> For Waldron's discussion of capital punishment, see Waldron (1992, 38–42).

<sup>36</sup> This presentation of Waldron's articulation of the *lex talionis* plausibly rebuts Duff's critique (2001, 143–146) of Waldron's article. It also plausibly defangs Adams's arguments (1975, 438–441) to the effect that the *lex talionis* cannot be applied consistently when multiple people are wronged by an individual, although I concede that there are remaining epistemological challenges. Unfortunately, though, space precludes a thorough discussion of these authors' critiques.

way of casting the *lex talionis* circumvent the challenge that this principle is much too vague to be of much practical help? It might not as an analysis of how the state should punish. Even if this is so, however, the *lex talionis*, operating in conjunction with Waldron's supporting regulations, may still be utilized for present theological purposes. For one thing, the practicable problem with the *lex talionis* seems to be an epistemic problem. We sometimes do not know what most fundamentally makes an action bad and how additional moral principles might bear upon the visitation of some or all of the badness of a wrongdoer's offense on him. God does not share this limitation, however. Moreover, in articulating a model of divine punishment, the goal is not to eliminate the mystery of how God punishes such that we can predict precisely how God would penalize in a given situation. Rather, the goal is to present an analogous representation of how God might punish that is sufficiently comprehensive for our theological purposes. In this case, we seek a coherent rendering of a neo-Nyssen model of divine communicative punishment that explains how God can punish in severe yet loving ways.

With this goal in mind, it must be mentioned that Gregory's broader theology delivers resources for considering how punishment in accordance with the *lex talionis* might be circumscribed and applied. Recall, first, that for Gregory divine punishment is fundamentally motivated by love. But, of course, for Gregory and the Christian tradition more generally love has rich moral content. If God loves someone, it might be said, God values this person and wills this person's highest good, which entails God willing that this person be united to Himself in beatitude.<sup>37</sup> Thus, insofar as God punishes motivated by love, God will not act in talionic ways that intrinsically collide with the features of love. God would not engage in degrading forms of penalization, for example.<sup>38</sup> Arguably, creatures with free will may choose to take umbrage at any kind of divine punishment and use it as an occasion for further rebellion. But God's punishment would not be of the kind that its subjects could not in principle recognize as being motivated by redemptive love (cf. *Cat. Or.*, 26.7; Hardy 1954, 304). Second, it is important for Gregory that God values human freedom. In fact, Gregory in effect appeals to the value of human freedom to explain why God does not compel commitment to the Christian faith (*Cat. Or.*, 23.1-2; cf. 5.11; Hardy 1954, 299 and 277-278; cf. *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 5.35). Supposing then that God values human freedom in this way, it is plausible that God would not deliver crushing penalties that entirely subjugate the creature's will to His. Rather, God's punishments would always leave creatures with a range of responses, including the ability to continue in rebellion. Doing this would require divine sensitivity not only to what the human frame can generally bear but also to the historical and psychological particularities of individuals.<sup>39</sup> So, while God may punish talionically, Gregory would have us add that it is "the mark of wisdom" that the way in which this punishment "returns like for like, [does not] exclude a higher aim" of synergistically redemptive love (*Cat. Or.* 26.3; Hardy 1954, 303). But how might divine talionic punishment exhibit redemptive love? In particular, how might talionic yet redemptive punishment be taken up into an account of divine communicative punishment?

The supplies for the answer have already been provided. Remember that for Gregory when humans (or rational creatures more generally) sin, they do so by turning their inner gaze away from God and His good ways. But if sin consists in turning one's inner gaze away from God and the good, then surely refusing to repent, reform, and seek appropriate reconciliation

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<sup>37</sup> Relevant here is McGuckin (2017, 155-174).

<sup>38</sup> For a view of divine love that plausibly has the implication that God would not disrespect or demean humans, see Wessling (2020, 39-75).

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of this, see Adams (1990, 211-212).

likewise involves the misdirection of one's inner gaze, since such misdirection is also sinful. Divine talionic punishment, then, can be used to redirect the sinner's inner gaze. For when humans commit wrongs, it is all too easy for them to avoid reflecting on the depth of their wrongdoing, to make half-hearted apologies, and to ignore the necessary means of change. However, these tendencies are often arrested when one is forced to experience, from "the inside," some or all of the features of their own wrongdoing. Now, when one is the subject of a similar sort of badness that one inflicts upon others, the badness of one's own actions and the need to change and make amends are not so easy to ignore. Minimally, it is plausible that God can use talionic punishment to create a context in which one is forced to wrestle with one's own wrongdoing and choose whether one wants to begin down the path of spiritual healing or clench the fist of rebellion.

Crucially, though, if God's punishments *qua* punishments are to carry within them the seeds of redemption, it is not enough for God to visit upon wrongdoers some or all of the characteristics of the badness of their actions in the hope that this will precipitate salvation. Instead, these punishments themselves must somehow illumine the path to spiritual change. This might include pointing sinners to their need for Christ and the power of his atoning work, or if such knowledge is presently unavailable or misunderstood, it might include pointing the subjects of punishment to certain aspects of the good as they understand it. How, precisely, God might include such redemptive elements within God's punishments is anyone's guess. For it is plausible that God has means of using communicative punishment for redemptive purposes that far outstrip our imaginative capacities. God, for instance, might relevantly communicate diachronically by weaving together premortem and postmortem events or by highlighting things to which sinners should attend via the power of the Spirit. But the fact that we cannot say precisely how God redemptively communicates in punishment should not weaken our confidence that God does, should He want to. This is especially the case if we have conceptual examples of God's redemptive and communicative punishment applied. But this is exactly what we have with Gregory's depiction of the deceit of the devil—or, more exactly, our reconstruction of it. It is in God's very punishment that the means for Satan's salvation are procured and the opportunity to receive it is made manifest.

Stated succinctly, then, the following is the neo-Nyssen model of divine communicative punishment, which draws from the insights of Duff, Waldron, and most fundamentally Gregory himself. God punishes sinners to communicate to them the censure they deserve by visiting upon them some or all of the characteristics of the badness of their actions, the visitation of which is informed by God's communicative purposes (including how best to communicate given general and specific features of the creature at issue) and accompanying moral principles (specifically love and respect for creaturely freedom). Receiving this censure sometimes can be considerably severe (more on this in the next section). Yet essential to this punishment is the implementation of a context in which sinners can wrestle with their offenses, so that they might repent of their shortcomings, and discern (in part or whole) the way of salvation. Such a context makes sense when paired with Gregory's general account of the psychology of personal sin, where sinners need to have their inner gaze redirected and their suppressions of spiritual truth challenged. But, unlike with Duff's version of communicative punishment, the divine punishment is talionic and itself may or may not be fully penitential on the neo-Nyssen model (i.e., reparation and reconciliation may or may not be integral to the punishment itself, though it might often be the expected result of genuine repentance). Importantly, moreover, divine punitive success is not to be viewed as fundamentally dependent upon the change of sinners, but on the punishment's intrinsic communicative effectiveness: it is the kind of talionic punishment that provides a context in

which transgressors are subjected to some of the (like-for-like) badness deserved so that they may in principle struggle with the depth of their sins and respond appropriately to the fact that they have committed these evils.<sup>40</sup> It can be said that God may administer communicative punishment through secondary agents (think Romans 13:1–5 or ecclesial penitential requirements) or in a more immediate fashion (think of the final judgment). Finally, God metes out punishments not for the sake of mere revenge, but principally motivated by love.

#### 4. Two Applications of the Neo-Nyssen Model

This article began by noting the opinion of some theologians that God’s punishments are not only loving but also sometimes considerably severe. The chief examples of severe divine punishment used were striking people dead and sending people to hell, both of which are apparently found in Scripture. How might the advocate of the neo-Nyssen model of punishment understand such instances of severe divine punishment?

Answers to this question are bound to be speculative. After all, we are only given hints in Scripture and authoritative Christian tradition as to what shape God’s punishments in love might take. Still, theological speculation can be helpful. Even without supposing to know exactly how God would use severe punishments communicatively and redemptively, articulating coherent scenarios that *might* or *could* represent how God achieves these punitive aims can serve to mitigate certain forms of skepticism about the neo-Nyssen model. The tactic would then be defensive. Divine killings and damnations are compatible with the neo-Nyssen model, initial appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. Hence, biblical depictions of such severe punishments should not, by themselves, give one reason to suppose that the neo-Nyssen model is untenable.

Let us first consider the death penalty when given by God. In Acts, there is a well-known passage where King Herod adorns himself with royal robes and delivers a public message. In response the people begin shouting, “The voice of a god, and not of a mortal!” (12:22). Sadly, King Herod’s time to revel in his new status soon comes to an end, for an angel of the Lord “immediately struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died” (12:23). The proximate reason for this death sentence given by the text is that Herod, in accepting the praise of the people, “had not given the glory to God” (12:23). But the backstory is that Herod “laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church,” imprisoning Peter and executing James, son of Zebedee (Acts 12:1–5).

Obviously, the author of Acts aims to communicate that Herod set himself up against God, as revealed in the Christian movement, even to the point of putting himself in the honor-receiving place of God. If God is impassible, Herod’s actions certainly do not *harm* God. However, Herod does, according to the text, *wrong* God. Most significantly, Herod elevates himself, a mere creature, into the place of the God who is the one and only ultimate locus of the good, the true, and the beautiful. To elevate oneself into the place of God is to disrespect

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<sup>40</sup> It is imprecise to say that God *aims toward* or *attempts to bring about* redemption on the neo-Nyssen model, as Wessling (2017) says in relation to his model of divine punishment. Since God is fully practically rational, God does not aim *per se* at redemptive outcomes, such as repentance, that He knows will not be achieved—knowledge that, it seems, God would sometimes have, given that His penal impositions concern free subjects. Rather, on the neo-Nyssen model, divine punishment aims to provide a *context* in which transgressors are subjected to some of the like-for-like badness deserved which *in principle* helps them struggle with the depth of their sins and respond appropriately to the fact that they have committed these sins.

God and to invert the order of values dramatically. Given the *lex talionis*, it might be thought that God should similarly disrespect Herod. But, arguably, demeaning Herod is not something that a good and loving God can do. However, God can put Herod in his proper creaturely place by communicating to him the fundamental value-inversion of Herod's sin.

The proponent of the neo-Nyssen model affirms that, in keeping with the *lex talionis*, the appropriate way for God to punish Herod is for God to force Herod to experience some or all of the bad characteristics of his action. In this case, it might be said, what ultimately makes Herod's action bad is that he is acting as if God is not at the center of reality. So, the appropriate punishment would be to have Herod experience what the world would be like were God not at the center. But since all value and existence find their ultimate source in God, the attempt to remove God from God's proper place is effectively to choose non-being—without God there is no creaturely reality.<sup>41</sup> Were, *per impossibile*, Herod to succeed in removing God from His proper place, the result for Herod (and everyone else) would be non-existence. However, if God wants to punish redemptively, God cannot wipe Herod from existence. What God can do, though, is have Herod experience a feature of non-being in somatic death (i.e., removal from the being of one's body). This would, it seems, subject Herod to some of the badness of his sin against God.

Someone might still wonder how such punishment could be redemptive. One option would be to suppose that Herod would be given a postmortem chance to reflect upon the relation his untimely death bears to his persecution of Christ's church and his prideful reception of praise that belongs only to God (cf. Beilby 2021). In reflecting upon these matters, maybe the Spirit would lead Herod to realize that Jesus, whose movement he tried to diminish, is, or minimally very well could be, the promised Messiah in whom salvation is found. Should Herod repent, the Spirit might lead Herod through the next stages of salvation. Another complementary option would be to join Gavin D'Costa (2009, 161–211) in revising and rehabilitating the doctrine of limbo in order to account for extended opportunities for salvation. For those who reject the possibility of postmortem salvation,<sup>42</sup> as well as anything like limbo, it might be helpful to note that Flavius Josephus indicates that Herod experienced terrible abdominal pains for five days before his death (perhaps this is to what Acts refers when it speaks of Herod being “eaten by worms”) and sensed that he was encountering divine judgment for receiving praise due only to God.<sup>43</sup> If this account is basically accurate, it takes little imagination to conceive of ways in which Herod's terrible and somewhat slow demise could be the door to his salvation. Apart from cases involving prolonged deaths that provide contexts for reflection, there are creative proposals for last minute, antemortem salvation that involve God meeting people mystically in the dying process which confounds terrestrial measurements of time (cf. Rutledge 2018, 151–161 and Stump 210, 620, n. 83). These proposals also furnish resources for thinking about how God's redemptive penal communication might take place.

The present treatment of the badness of Herod's sin and God's punitive response to it are bound to be controversial. But the general point to be taken from this specific example is that it is reasonable to assume that God can kill in communicatively redemptive ways. If one is open to postmortem salvation, then one potentially has the means of dealing with any number

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<sup>41</sup> For Gregory, as with much of the Christian tradition, sin is not a substance that has its own ontological status. It is rather a parasite that depends upon a deprivation or misalignment of good (see, e.g., *Cat. Or.* 7.3), a good which, we add, plausibly is derived from God.

<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2000, Article 12, sect. 1021).

<sup>43</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 19.8.2 343–361.

of scriptural depictions of divine killings for personal sins. But the other conceptual resources mentioned (which are compatible with postmortem salvation) might also be used to similar effect.

Let us now turn our attention ever so briefly to hellish punishment. Given the neo-Nyssen model, this kind of punishment arguably would be structurally similar to divine killings in that damnation attempts to communicate that rebellion against God signifies the inversion of reality, the result of which would be non-being. Hell communicates this fact (or facets thereof) by having the damned experience bodily death (at least often) and unignorable relational estrangement from God and each other (a kind of breakdown of relational reality). At the same time, the advocate of the neo-Nyssen model might insist that hell, too, allows for the opportunity for full redemption. For even hellish punishments can be said to provide a context in which sinners are subjected to deserved hard-treatment so that they may in principle struggle with the depth of their sins and repent, and perhaps ultimately be united with God and the glorified saints for all eternity.

There are many ways that God might achieve redemptive communication in hell. But a common Eastern Orthodox view of hell—one that is sometimes attributed to Gregory—includes an especially helpful resource: the pangs of hell are primarily due to the manifest presence of the holy and loving God.<sup>44</sup> On this understanding, heaven and hell are not principally two separate locations where the saved and damned are assigned, but the dramatically different ways in which these individuals experience the omnipresent God once the veil of divine hiddenness has been permanently ripped asunder. For the redeemed, the eschatological divine presence is experienced as eternal joy; the damned experience it as an imposing psychological terror. We might speculate that a reason the damned find the presence of God so terrifying is that it illuminates, by contrast, their shameful sin and their alienation from God and each other and it calls them to a humble repentance and service to Christ that their pride will not allow. But if they give up their pride, and trust the provisions of God's Son, they will find restoration with God and creation. So, at one fell swoop (even if continuous), God inflicts the damned with some of the characteristics of the badness of their rebellion (i.e., relational estrangement from God and each other which is made clear through the divine presence), while also having them experience the very divine presence they need for redemption (in terms of highlighting both their sin and to whom they must turn for spiritual renewal).

This proposal concerning hell certainly requires more fleshing out than can be done here. It also relies upon the controversial claim that full redemption remains possible for the damned,<sup>45</sup> the assessment of which would require an examination of Scripture,<sup>46</sup> specific ecclesial traditions,<sup>47</sup> and more besides.<sup>48</sup> Suffice it to say that Gregory, as noted already, is often interpreted as affirming apocatastasis (see, e.g., Daley 1991, 88–89; Ludlow 2000a; Ramelli 2013, 279–658; Sachs 1993, 632–638), where redemptive opportunities are not limited

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<sup>44</sup> See Hopko (1976, 196–197) for a brief description of this understanding of hell. For an enticing philosophical account and defense of this basic model of hell, see Manis (2019). For a defense of the idea that Gregory held to something like the divine presence model, see Hierotheos (1996, 138–143; cf. Hayes 1996, 101) and Green (2009, 57–58).

<sup>45</sup> Gregory, like many great Eastern theologians before and after him, assumes that creatures retain freedom of will in hell. See (Maspero 2010, 55–64) and Ramelli (2013, *passim*).

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion of the biblical merits of this “open-door” view of hell, see MacDonald (2008, 150–158).

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., n. 42.

<sup>48</sup> For a discussion of just some of the additional issues, see Buckareff and Plug (2005, 39–54), Hebblethwaite (1984, 170–174), Kvanvig (1993, ch. 4), and MacDonald (2008, ch. 5).



to this terrestrial life but continue even into hell itself. Thus, proponents of the neo-Nyssen model who affirm that divine hellish punishments may effectuate saving reconciliation with God are walking in step with Gregory. Nevertheless, advocates of the neo-Nyssen model might add that though God's punishments in hell might eventually lead to the restoration of all things, there is nothing about the view that requires this result, should God leave creatures room to rebel. As such, this understanding of hell makes space for a hopeful but not necessarily dogmatic universalism. However one chooses to work out the details, the proposal is that the doctrine of hell, or at least a version of it, is compatible with the neo-Nyssen model of divine punishment, and operates in the spirit of Gregory even if it does not correspond to the letter of the law.

It should be mentioned, however, that some deny that Gregory affirms apocatastasis (for a helpful discussion see Green 2019, 38–58). Indeed, in some instances Gregory appears to teach that the damned, or some subset thereof, have irreparably cut themselves off from God's salvation. In his treatment of the biblical parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–31), for instance, Gregory appears to take the postmortem chasm separating the two with complete seriousness. About this chasm Gregory writes, "For anyone who has once chosen pleasure in this life and has not cured his recklessness through repentance, renders inaccessible to himself the country of the good hereafter, for he has dug by himself this impassible necessity like a yawning and unbridgeable abyss" (*On the Soul and Resurrection*, 5.39).<sup>49</sup> While it is not entirely clear whether Gregory means for statements of this kind to preclude apocatastasis, it is worth commenting on whether proponents of the neo-Nyssen model can sensibly maintain both that divine punishment in hell is redemptive and yet that redemption from, or out of, hell is impossible. There is some plausibility to the idea that this conjunction of claims can be sensibly affirmed.

To see this, we must insist on a key distinction. The distinction is between punishment that has the capacity to start one down the path of full salvation—which perhaps culminates in (continually deepening) deification, the beatific vision, and the like—and punishment that is redemptive but does not depend on the possibility of regeneration or full salvation. When this distinction is kept firmly in place, the defender of the neo-Nyssen model might say that although divine punishment is always redemptive, it need not always facilitate full salvation. No, maybe there are persons for which regeneration and full salvation are no longer feasible but God nevertheless punishes in order to redeem what remains feasible to redeem.

Here is one way of conceptualizing how such eschatological punishment might take place. Someone might affirm as essential to the neo-Nyssen model not that divine punishment provides contexts in which sinners can be fully saved, or begin that process, but that this punishment provides contexts in which the best viable redemptive options are instantiated. Unfortunately for the damned, full salvation and reconciliation with God are no longer viable. Perhaps this is so because the damned are comprised only of those who have become, as a result of their free choices, so hardened against God and His ways that they can no longer choose to obey Him or seek full salvation (cf. Gregory's *On the Soul and Resurrection* 5.35; Swinburne 1989, 177–148 and 180–184; Kvanvig 2011).<sup>50</sup> However, an unsurpassably loving God would do what He could for these hardened individuals. Maybe the best available redemptive option in such a case is to make the damned acutely aware of their sins via the

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<sup>49</sup> See Green (2019, 51–52) for commentary.

<sup>50</sup> It might be added that, as paradoxical as it may initially seem, God has good and loving reason for granting humans this ability for self-imprisonment. Maybe such an ability is necessary for humans to be profoundly responsible beings (cf. Manis 2019, 193–244).

divine presence discussed, even if this will not lead to repentance. Specifically, it might be that the manifest presence of God illuminates for the damned their alienation from God and their need to repent, but their unwillingness to do so is partially what causes them pain, since there remains in the damned a deep yet suppressed desire to be reconciled with God. In this way, punishment creates a context wherein sinners could, in principle (i.e., if they were not so hardened in sin), wrestle with the depth of their sin so that they might respond with appropriate repentance and the will to change. But the goal of repentance is not what justifies the punishment. What justifies the punishment in this case, it might be said, is that it actualizes the best available redemptive option for the damned. The idea might be that humans flourish best when they are aligned with moral and spiritual reality. While the wills of the damned are irreparably set against God, this does not necessarily mean that God would not dispel some of the delusions of the damned via communicative punishment. For the result of this punishment would be that the minds of damned are more aligned with moral and spiritual reality than they would be otherwise. Consequently, on this way of thinking, the damned live better lives than they would if they were completely out of sync with moral and spiritual reality in both mind and will. God's punishment is thus redemptive, albeit limited by the terrible circumstances and experienced as an imposition.

There is an obvious challenge to this second option regarding eschatological punishment. Previously it was mentioned that one of the shortcomings of Gregory's bare account of punishment is that it seems unable to preserve Gregory's emphasis on the value of human freedom. On the contrary, in some places Gregory appears to ratchet up the intensity of divine punishment to such a degree that it seems that the inevitable result would be that the human will is utterly subjugated to God's, leaving the human bereft of agency. Does not the defender of the neo-Nyssen who opts for everlasting hellish punishment along the lines just expressed face a similar hurdle? After all, on this conception of hell, the damned continually have their noses rubbed in their own sins, presumably against their own abiding preferences to the contrary. This seems to violate human freedom and render this form of punishment unloving.

The objection is formidable but perhaps not insuperable. To begin with, nearly any form of punishment is going to involve the imposition of a burden that constrains the scope of the freedom of its subject. And, importantly, we do not regularly view such impositions as inherently unloving if they are done with sufficient care for the good of one punished. What makes Gregory's bare account untenable is that it appears to have God breaking the wills of those punished in an effort to save them. But many of us maintain that salvation that is not freely chosen is no salvation at all (cf. Kvanvig 2011, 12–16). Notice, though, that this second proposal on eternal punishment is not like that. This is not an instance of God breaking the backs of the damned so that they might be saved. It is rather closer to the idea that God is preserving the damned from further degradation (cf. Stump 1986). So, although this second proposal has God circumscribing the range of the free decisions of the damned, namely the degree to which they can deceive themselves, it is unclear that the relevant form of punishment is unloving or overrides human freedom in manner that is objectionable. But I grant that much more needs to be said on this matter.

What we plausibly have, then, is a neo-Nyssen model for conceiving of divine punishments as loving even when severe. With some modifications to the account of punishment handed down to us by Gregory, God's strong talionic penalties do not irresistibly subjugate sinners but either guide them into salvation, if only they freely cooperate, or actualize remaining redemptive options. I submit that these features make for a model of divine punishment

worthy of serious consideration. However, it remains to be seen whether this neo-Nyssen model is acceptable once all things have been considered.<sup>51</sup>

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