Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration V.3-4 (Second Invective Against Julian)

Julian’s failed attempt to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple with the help of the Jews

Name of the author: Gregory of Nazianzus
Date: 364 CE
Language: Greek

Category: Christian

Title of work: Oration V (Second Invective Against Julian)
Reference: V.3-4

Commentary:
- Gregory of Nazianzus (a small town in the Roman province of Cappadocia) was born in 329 or 330 CE to a Greek-speaking provincial elite family – his father was the bishop of Nazianzus. Along with Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus is known as one of the three Cappadocian Fathers, and championed Neo-Nicene orthodoxy. He had such great impact that during the Byzantine period, only the biblical Scriptures were published more widely than Gregory’s writings (see Elm, Sons of Hellenism, p. 4). Gregory wrote an impressive body of works, including 44 orations, panegyrics for Christian figures, funeral orations for relatives and friends, doctrinal treatises, apologies based on his life and ministry, 249 letters, and 17,000 lines of classically-styled poetry (see Daley, Gregory of Nazianzus, p. 1). Despite his great influence as a theological thinker and rhetorically skilled author, however, whose writings were respected by Augustine and Gregory the Great, and translated into Latin by Rufinus, scholarship has long viewed Gregory as weak and indecisive in character (see, for example, McGuckin, St. Gregory, p. 34, who characterises him as vulnerable to the wishes of others, over-sensitive, insecure, and anxious, all of which caused him to experience a “plasticity of career”; Daley, Gregory of Nazianzus, p. 2, describes him as an “energetic pastor,” but at the same time a “loner ill-suited to the conflicts of public administration”). For instance, he opted not to take up his duties after being made bishop of Sasima (a small hamlet in Cappadocia), preferring to go to Seleucia for three years instead, eventually becoming the leader of the Nicene Christians in Constantinople in 379 CE. A few months later, the emperor Theodosius I arrived in the new Roman capital, and made Gregory bishop there, only to see him resign from this post nine months later and retire to the country due to pressure from Alexandrian and Antiochene bishops. This presentation has been questioned by Susanna Elms, who suggests that it is not supported by the fact that Gregory was of so much apparent influence to Theodosius; so much so that not only did he see him fit to be the bishop of Rome’s new capital, Constantinople, but that Gregory’s speeches informed the emperor’s legislation on heresy (Elm, Sons of Hellenism, p. 6; on Gregory and Theodosius, see McLynn, “Moments of Truth”). Regardless of how one views Gregory’s strength of character, what is clear from his writings against the emperor Julian (known thanks to Gregory as Julian the Apostate), from which the present extract is taken, is that he had a strong conviction regarding God’s certain punishment of apostasy and impiety. That Julian had abandoned the Christian God who had shown great favour to Rome, and had recently claimed the loyalty of its emperors, yet had suffered a miserable fate all the same, for Gregory sends a strong message about where the empire needed to place its loyalty. This passage from Gregory’s Fifth Oration, the second of two speeches written against the emperor Julian, describes the failed attempt of Julian to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple with the help of Jews, and demonstrates Gregory’s wider point regarding the necessity of Rome to remain loyal to the Christian God by describing the divine punishment brought upon those involved in the rebuilding project, and making clear that Julian’s claims to comprehend the will of the divine is entirely misguided.

As Susanna Elm explains, in a wider context, Gregory’s fifth Oration acted as a response to events which had recently occurred; significantly, Julian’s failed campaign against the Persians in 363 CE, which ultimately led to his death, and Julian’s subsequent apotheosis, where he was granted the status of divus by the senate (see Elm, Sons of Hellenism, p. 435). According to Elm, Gregory’s first oration against the emperor Julian (Oration IV) had in his mind already succeeded in demonstrating his superior arguments and position. This much seems to be clear from the fact that Gregory opens Oration V by drawing on Homer’s Odyssey 22.5-6 (where Odysseus briefly pauses before completing his slaughter of Penelope’s unwanted suitors living in his house): “the first portion of my task has now been completed and brought to an end; for I have shown up the wickedness of that personage, both in what he did towards us, and in what he intended to do, perpetually contriving something yet more tyrannical than the last. Now, we shall aim at another mark, which perhaps no one has yet hit…” (see Elm, Sons of Hellenism, p. 433; the extract from Oration V.1 is translated by King, Julian the Emperor, p. 86). The mark which has not yet
been hit, Gregory proceeds to explain, is a description of the divine punishment that is brought upon Julian for his impiety. The present extract feeds into this theme by describing the failed attempt of Julian to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple. Essentially, Julian’s failure provides the proof for Gregory that the former was completely mistaken about his ability to understand the divine will.

In his Against the Galileans, Julian had argued that the God of Moses, whom the Jews worshipped, was indeed ancient and true, despite the fact that his followers incorrectly believed him to be the one universal God instead of understanding that he was merely the god of a specific area and its people. Despite this, however, Julian conceded that the Mosaic God still deserved sacrifices, and in an undated letter which we know through a fragment preserved by John Lydus (an antiquarian of the sixth century CE), Julian announced that he intended to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple (Letter 134; see Bidez, Julien, Lettres, p. 197). He also states in his Epistle to the Priest Theodorus in 363 CE that he was in the process of rebuilding it at that time (See Letter 89b in Bidez’s edition). Along with Ephrem of Nisibis’s Hymns 1 and 4 Against Julian, and the present text of Gregory, these references from Julian’s writings are the earliest we have about the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple. Ammianus Marcellinus’s Res Gestae also provides information in a later account (on which see further below), and it seems that the orders for the reconstruction began in the January of 363 CE, with the earthquake and fire described in the present text putting a stop to the work in the March of that same year (see Elm, Sons of Hellenism, p. 447).

The present account of Gregory is interesting for the particular way in which the events, and the motives of Julian and the Jews who help him, are presented. The historicity of the events which Gregory describes aside (we will discuss the various different accounts of this event below), the extremely negative way in which he portrays the “apostate” emperor and his Jewish followers, as well as what happens to them, is telling of Gregory’s viewpoint regarding who it is that God supports. To briefly summarise the passage, Gregory describes Julian (whom he never actually names, probably in an attempt to further degrade him) as so “mad” that he committed great acts of impiety, trampling everything that was holy, to the degree that he earns himself a comparison with several wicked figures from the Old Testament. Julian, it is argued, combines the apostasy of Jeroboam (see 1 Kings 12:25-33), the bloodlust of Ahab (1 Kings 16:30; 21), the hardheartedness of Pharaoh (Exodus 7:3), and the sacrilege of Nebuchadnezzar (see Daniel 5:1-4). Gregory also alludes to wicked Old Testament figures in section 4, where the Jews suffering God’s punishment are compared to idolaters from Israel’s history (see Leviticus 10). Julian is so ridden with vice that his actions amount to all the impiety of these biblical villains put together. The stirring up of the Jews against the Christians is described by Gregory as the climax of what had been a sustained attack on the Christians by Julian – he had exhausted every other form of tyranny, or deemed them unworthy of him. Moreover, it is claimed that Julian took advantage of the well-known hatred that the Jews held for the Christians, and convinced them by prophesying from their scriptures that the time had come for them to return to their land and rebuild the Temple, thereby restoring the institutions of their fathers (????????, patrios). Julian therefore fooled the Jews into helping him with his despicable plan against the Christians by making them believe that he was reversing the wrongs that had been done to them by Rome in the past.

Elm argues that Gregory strategically positions the account of the destruction of the Temple at the beginning of his account of Julian’s unsuccessful Persian campaign (which follows the extracts quoted here) in order to make plain that the emperor was too ignorant to take on board divine portents even of epic proportions, and for this reason was clearly not a divinely chosen leader doing the will of God. What Julian thought was an essential project was of no significance to the true God (Sons of Hellenism, p. 448). His misuse of the Jewish scriptures can therefore be understood partly within this context. We read that Julian has misinterpreted Jewish secret teachings, mysteries from their books, and subsequently has used his misinformed beliefs to manipulate the Jews, who think that he is acting out of good will towards them by rebuilding their holy site. In addition to showing the emperor’s malice, then, for Elm this detail also indicates that Julian was wrong in all his attempts to interpret the divine will. This is further emphasised by the portents which are described at the end of our passage amidst the catastrophic destruction of the partially built Temple. We will return to this theme shortly.

The earthquake destroys what the Jews believe to be a pious work, and subsequently they seek refuge in a nearby “sacred place” ??????, hieros), which itself subsequently has flames burst from its doors to condemn them. Some editions and interpreters understand this sacred place as a church, and thus argue that Gregory makes the point that what was once a sacred place, the Jerusalem Temple, no longer has this status. God’s favour has shifted from the Jews to the Christians (Christians had long argued that the destruction of the Temple was evidence of the transfer of God’s favour; see, for example, Epistle of Barnabas 16.1-5). Therefore, following this interpretation Gregory’s account narrates that even the Christian church could not save all the Jews from injury and death, as flames came forth from the door and burnt those clamoung to get in, rendering people either dead or maimed so that they were “living monuments” to God’s wrath against sinners. Indeed, this is perhaps also an important...
reminder that while God’s favour has shifted to the Christians, he is still not embodied by a building, whether the Temple of Jerusalem or a church – while the Temple has crumbled, the church is not entirely immune to similarly destructive forces, which God will utilise towards his own ends. However, it is also possible (as exemplified in the Sources Chrétiennes edition of Jean Bernardi) to read the “sacred place” as referring to pagan temples, which were often understood as places of refuge in a city.

There are then additional portents making God’s message unmistakably clear; firstly, a cross appears in the sky as a triumphal symbol which is described as God’s “trophy” (????????, τροπαίον) of his victory (????, νίκη), and secondly crosses appear on the clothes of the people present. The description of the cross as God’s trophy is particularly resonant within Roman tradition, the trophy being a symbol of Rome’s defeat of its enemies. Here, God, whom Gregory understands to be responsible for Rome’s enduring universal power, sends a clear signal that Julian and the Jews that he has convinced to help him are wrong. The empire’s power is not bound up in sacrificial rituals or temples, but rather is maintained by Christ. Indeed, Elm makes the point that scholars often miss the significance of Gregory’s account of this event by becoming side-tracked with issues of Jewish-Christian relations and the historical details of the rebuilding of the Temple. What must be kept in mind, is that for Gregory, the important thing is that Julian is incapable of reading and comprehending divine portents because he is not divinely chosen or connected to the divine in any way. He is just an impious apostate whose fate was deserved. Moreover, we should remember that Ammianus Marcellinus describes this event as just one failed temple project of Julian’s – he had also failed at building a sanctuary for Mamas and Apollo’s temple at Daphne. In addition, prior to John Chrysostom’s account of these events in his Against the Jews V.11.8, Christian reaction was not particularly strong. Gregory’s Oration is therefore just one source for this episode which must be understood in its broader context, which sought to portray Julian in a highly negative light, and dispel his claims that Rome’s continued success required the revival of cults (Sons of Hellenism, p. 450, and n. 61).

Numerous Christian authors presented Julian’s efforts as a specific attack against the Christian religion by the emperor, just as Gregory does here (see Bowersock, Julian, p. 89; Goodman, Rome & Jerusalem, p. 576; Blanchetière, “Julien Philhellène,” p. 63-68). For instance, Theodoret claims that Julian “armed” the Jews against the Christians (Ecclesiastical History III.15). Other Christian authors understood Julian’s project as a direct attack on Jesus’s prophecy about the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in Matthew 24:2, Mark 13:2 and Luke 21:5. John Chrysostom, for example, states that Julian in his madness wanted to “cancel out” Christ’s claim that the Temple would not be rebuilt (John Chrysostom, Against the Jews V.11.8; see also Philostorgius, Ecclesiastical History VII.9; Rufinus of Aquileia, Ecclesiastical History I.37; Socrates, Ecclesiastical History III.20 – Socrates adds that the Jews wanted to make the Christians suffer as much as they had done themselves under the Romans; Sozomen, Ecclesiastical History V.22.5; see Blanchetière, “Julien Philhellène,” p. 70). Indeed, Jan W. Drijvers has argued that only the Christian authors highlight the anti-Christian motivations of Julian in his wish to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple. Drijvers disagrees with scholars who follow the Christian authors and subsequently conclude that Julian primarily wanted to contradict Jesus's prophecy. Rather, Drijvers that Julian's project was first and foremost motivated by the will to restore the old cults, to revive the practice of sacrifice, and to reopen the temples (see Drijvers, “Ammianus Marcellinus 23.1.2-3,” p. ). Related to this point is another interesting difference between Gregory’s testimony and other Christian narratives, as he does not mention the issue of the performance of sacrifices, unlike John Chrysostom, Against the Jews V.11.4-5 and De Sancta Babyla contra Julianum et Gentiles 22; Rufinus of Aquileia, Ecclesiastical History I.37; Sozomen, Ecclesiastical History V.22.4; Socrates, Ecclesiastical History III.20.1-5; and Theodoret, Ecclesiastical History III.20. These Christian authors use the argument that the Jews could not perform sacrifices anymore (because their Temple was gone) as justification for Julian wanting to rebuild the Temple, as he thought that the performance of sacrifices (even to the Jewish god) were beneficial to the health of the Roman empire.

In addition to Christian accounts there is also the important testimony of Ammianus Marcellinus, who describes Julian’s compelling of the Jews to rebuild the Temple in his Res Gestae XXIII.1.1-3. There are numerous points of agreement between the Christian accounts and that of Ammianus, as well as some divergences. Firstly, Ammianus states that Julian wanted to restore the Temple “at vast cost” (sumptibus), and enlisted the help of the provincial governor. This suggests that the public fiscus may have been responsible, at least in part, for funding Julian’s project. Some Christian authors narrate on the contrary that Julian provided all the necessary means (John Chrysostom, Against the Jews V.11.8; Socrates, Ecclesiastical History III.20.6). However, others, including the present account of Gregory’s, assert that the Jews themselves provided funds (in addition to V.4 of Gregory’s account above, see also Sozomen, Ecclesiastical History V.22.5; Theodoret, Ecclesiastical History III.20.2). As Gregory tells it, “not only did their women strip off all their personal ornaments and contribute it towards the work and operations, but even carried away the rubbish in the laps of their gowns, sparing neither the so precious clothes nor yet the tenderness of their own limbs.” One thing that various of the Christian narratives and
Ammianus’s account have in common is that they describe both levelling work which was undertaken prior to the building operations, and that supernatural events occurred during the laying of the Temple's foundations. For Ammianus and John Chrysostom, this involved balls of fire bursting from near the foundations (Ammianus, Res Gestae XXIII.1.3; John Chrysostom, Against the Jews V.11.9; De Sancta Babyla contra Julianum et Gentiles 22). Others, including our extract from Gregory, tell the story slightly differently, and with more details, involving an earthquake and fire. Indeed, Gregory describes a “blast of wind” and a “sudden heaving of the earth.” Moreover, when the Jews run and taken refuge in a nearby church, flames come out from its doors and repel them (for similar accounts, see also Sozomen, Ecclesiastical History V.22.7-11; Socrates, Ecclesiastical History III.20.8-10; Theodoret, Ecclesiastical History III.20.4-6, describes an earthquake and then fire coming from the excavations). For Gregory, no fire comes from the foundations of the Temple, however. Some scholars have suggested that the earthquake which is described might have been one that occurred on the 18th-19th of May 363 CE, after Julian left for his Persian campaign. However, this is based upon the dubious testimony of a Syriac letter attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem (for the relevance of this argument for Ammianus’s account, see Matthews, The Roman Empire, p. 495; the historicity of the earthquake and fire destroying the Temple foundations is also argued for in Thélamon, Païens et Chrétiens, p. 305-306, but contested in Bowersock, Julian, p. 120-122). Finally, unlike Ammianus, some of the Christian authors, again including Gregory, describe additional portents sent from heaven. In Gregory’s account this is the appearance of crosses on the clothes of the Jews and also a cross appearing in the sky (V.4; see also Socrates, Ecclesiastical History III.20.14; Sozomen, Ecclesiastical History V.22.12; Theodoret, Ecclesiastical History III.20.7).

What each of these accounts, both Christian and non-Christian, agree upon is that some combination of supernatural events put a stop to the rebuilding efforts. Coming back to Gregory’s account, regardless of the historicity of the various elements of the narrative, we can draw some conclusions about the way in which he viewed the relationship between the Roman empire and its emperor and the one true God. As Elm argues, where Gregory and Julian can be compared is that they both believed themselves capable of interpreting the divine will. From the information we can gather from Julian’s own writings and those who wrote about his actions, it seems that at least part of Julian’s motivation for rebuilding the Temple was to fit in with his broader project of cult restoration (on this topic, see Ammianus Marcellinus, Res Gestae XXII.5; for a discussion of Julian’s writings in their contexts, and their relevance for assessing the possible strategic motivations of Julian’s rebuilding project, see the commentary on Ammianus Marcellinus, Res Gestae XXIII.1.1-3). For Julian, Rome’s continued safety and prosperity would be assured by reverting back to the worship of various deities (seemingly including the Jewish God). For Gregory, of course, Rome’s power and success would be ensured by continued belief in Christ (on this issue, see Elm, Sons of Hellenism, p. 10-11). It is for this reason that Gregory takes pains in this passage to ridicule Julian’s failure, and highlight the dramatic signs sent by God demonstrating that the apostate emperor and all those tricked into following him are drastically mistaken in their beliefs. The Temple cannot and ought not to be rebuilt – the burning bodies of those who try therefore act as “living monuments” (?????, st?l?) of God’s wrath. The triumph of the Christian God is made abundantly clear through the description of the crosses which appear both on the clothes of the Jews and in the sky, and affirmed even more by the likening of the crucifix to God’s trophy. This military image, reminiscent of Rome’s own power over those it subdued, confirms that there is only one deity of relevance to the empire now, and the failure to recognise this will result in hopeless devastation.

Keywords in the original language:

- ?????
- ?????????????
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Thematic keywords in English:

- apostasy
- cross
- divine punishment
- divine victory
- flame
- impiety
- Jerusalem Temple
- Jews
- Julian the Apostate
- miracle
- rebuilding of the Temple
- trophy

Bibliographical references:

Epistle of Barnabas 16.1-5

The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple

- Read more about Epistle of Barnabas 16.1-5

Text

Ammianus Marcellinus, Res Gestae XXIII.1.1-3

Julian's attempt to rebuild the temple of Jerusalem

- Read more about Ammianus Marcellinus, Res Gestae XXIII.1.1-3

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