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## John the Evangelist as the Forerunner of the Word Reading St Maximus the Confessor's *Ambiguum* 21

*Abstract.* The paper deals with the *Amb.* 21 of St Maximus the Confessor in which he attempts to resolve the ambiguity posed by St Gregory the Theologian calling John the Evangelist ‘the forerunner of the Word’. Maximus’ solution is analysed in detail as it provides significant insights into not only his understanding of the iconic nature of the Gospel as it relates to the world to come, but also into the way he develops his theological reasoning, as well as his understanding of the authority of the patristic authors.

### Introduction

While interpreting difficult passages in St Gregory the Theologian’s works in his *Ambigua* Maximus stumbles across an odd case of the Holy Fathers conflation of the two holy figures. In his *Oration* 28 St Gregory refers to John the Evangelist as ‘the Forerunner of the Word’:

I hope I may not seem to some of you to be labouring the matter if I say that it may be this that the Word himself was hinting at, when he said that some things, which could not be borne, would at some future time, be borne and made plain. Perhaps it is those things which John, the forerunner of the Word and great voice of truth, affirmed to be beyond the present world’s power to contain.<sup>1</sup>

It is quite clear that in the end of this sentence Gregory refers to the concluding words of the Gospel of John: “And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books which were written” (John 21: 25). What is not clear is why does the Cappadocian father call the Evangelist ‘the forerunner of the Word’ (ὁ τοῦ Λόγου πρόδρομος). It is well known, and it was known in St Gregory’s and St Maximus’ time as well, that the ‘Forerunner’ is a designation reserved for John the Baptist. So how come it is used by Gregory to designate John the Apostle? It might also be added that the other phrase ‘great voice of truth’ also refers to the actual Forerunner since it alludes to the phrase ‘a voice of one crying in the wil-

<sup>1</sup> Εἰ δὲ μὴ λίαν δοκῶ τισὶ περιττὸς καὶ περιέργος τὰ τοιαῦτα ἐξετάζων, οὐδὲ ἄλλα τινὰ τυχὸν ἢ ταῦτα ἦν, ἃ μὴ δύνασθαι νῦν βασταχθῆναι ὁ Λόγος αὐτὸς ὑπηγίσσετο, ὡς ποτε βασταχθησόμενα καὶ τρανωθησόμενα, καὶ ἃ μὴδ’ ἂν «αὐτὸν δυνηθῆναι χωρῆσαι τὸν κάτω κόσμον» Ἰωάννης ὁ τοῦ Λόγου πρόδρομος, ἡ μεγάλη τῆς ἀληθείας φωνή, διωρίζετο. *Or.* 28.20 [SC 250: 142D]. I use the English translation provided by Frederick W. Norris, Lionel Wickham, Frederick Williams (eds. and trans.), *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning: The Five Theological Orations of Gregory Nazianzen* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 236, with a small yet significant adjustment. While the phrase ὁ τοῦ Λόγου πρόδρομος has been translated as ‘the Word’s messenger’ in this edition, I translate it literally as ‘the forerunner of the Word’.

derness' (φωνή βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ), as John the Baptist calls himself in John 1: 23.<sup>2</sup> Has Gregory made a mistake confusing two Johns? Or is he conveying a deeper understanding of the Apostle's foreshadowing of the divine Logos? Through the analysis of Maximus' interpretation of this passage we will try to extract typical traits of Confessors hermeneutics, as well as some observations regarding his approach to the authority of his holy predecessors. But before we turn to St Maximus' resolution of this ambiguity, we will focus on the place of this passage in Gregory's *Oration 28*.

### God's incomprehensibility

Continuing his polemics with the Eunomians, which he began in his *Oration 27*, in his *Oration 28* St Gregory discusses God's incomprehensibility. Confronting Plato's statement that God is difficult to comprehend but impossible to express, Gregory affirms his well-known position that God is impossible to express and yet even more impossible to comprehend.<sup>3</sup> This goes not only for those who are not versed in exploring the divine things, but also for those who are committed and proficient in *theoria* (θεωρία). In a manner foreshadowing the Areopagite's ascent on the apophatic ladder, Gregory denies God's corporeality and spatiality, adding that Divinity is entirely invisible and cannot be adequately known through bodily images. "No one has yet discovered or ever shall discover what God is in his nature and essence",<sup>4</sup> St Gregory affirms adding that this knowledge will be attained when the God's image in human beings rises up to its prototype and our mind unites with the One with whom it is akin. Knowledge of God which is attainable in this life is but "a small radiance from a great light" (οἷον μεγάλου φωτὸς μικρὸν ἀπαύγασμα).<sup>5</sup>

This "radiance", a limited knowledge which is knowledge in as much it is (in those who possess it) greater than ignorance (of other people), Gregory continues, was familiar to great figures of both Old Testament – such as Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Elijah, Ezekiel – and the New Testament time – such as are Apostles Peter and Paul. The knowledge of God, as it is discussed in Paul's letter, is related with the words of John the Evangelist. In both cases we are dealing with the unspeakable knowledge, possessed by both apostolic figures. In the case of St Paul, Gregory refers to his inability to express what he witnessed in his ascent to the third heaven (2 Cor. 12: 2-4), as well as to his words from 1 Cor. 13: 9 ("For we know in part, and we prophesy in part"). On the other hand, John testifies to this limitation of our ability to know and express God when he speaks about Christ's deeds as if they were to be written down, all the books would not be contained by the world (Jn. 21: 25). Therefore, the partial knowledge that we are currently given (because we are not able to bear more than that, as we are taught by the Logos himself) is but a radiance

<sup>2</sup> As it has been rightly pointed out by Arthur J. Mason, *The Five Theological Orations of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1899), 52, n. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Ἀλλὰ φράσαι μὲν ἀδύνατον, ὡς ὁ ἐμὸς λόγος, νοῆσαι δὲ ἀδυνατώτερον – *Or.* 28.4 [SC 250: 108A].

<sup>4</sup> Θεόν, ὃ τί ποτε μὲν ἐστὶ τὴν φύσιν καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν, οὔτε τις εὔρεν ἀνθρώπων πώποτε, οὔτε μὴ εὔρη. *Or.* 28.17.1-2 (SC 250: 134C; *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning*, 233).

<sup>5</sup> *Or.* 28.17 (SC 250: 136A). Norris et al, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning*, 233 translated ἀπαύγασμα as 'a small beam'.

and a small part of the knowledge which, as we are told by the Apostle John whom Gregory here calls 'the Forerunner', cannot be contained in the whole world.

The same issue of God's incomprehensibility which dominates this whole oration is at the very centre of the discussed passage as well. It is in this context that the two apostles who witness this limitation of human knowledge and language are linked and one of them is called the Forerunner of the Word. The central topic of this passage and of the whole oration is very well recognised by St Maximus. Therefore, he develops his interpretation of this peculiar ambiguity around the issue of God's incomprehensibility. It is precisely in this context that John the Evangelist was rightly called, Maximus argues, the Forerunner of the Word.

### Shadow, icon and the Truth

*Ambiguum 21* represents one out of eight Maximus' *Ambigua* (15-22) dealing with Gregory's *Oration 28*. The previous one discusses the same paragraph and Gregory's use of three different terms for describing St Paul's out of body experience (progress, ascent, assumption). Therefore, the idea of the mystical ascent into God's unknowability is already present and well introduced. Maximus begins his attempt at resolving the ambiguity caused by Gregory's naming the other John as the 'Forerunner' by referring to two scriptural commandments. First, he points to the commandment of obeying the superiors (Heb. 13: 17) implying the need to comply with the task that is given to him by his friend John of not only examining but also explicating his understanding of Gregory's wisdom. This apology for even daring to write something down represents a common trope present in almost all of his works. And secondly, he states that he is also obliged to study the Scriptures (Jn. 5: 39) and search for the deeper meaning of it. By referring to this other commandment Maximus suggests that the sacral status of St Gregory's writing is not much different from that of the Holy Scripture. Therefore, the commandment to study the Scripture can be understood to refer to both.

The 'scriptural' status of St Gregory's writings is also implied when Maximus' states his profound exegetical principle before he begins his hermeneutical *tour de force*. Contradictions which can sometimes seem present not in the Scripture must be regarded only as superficial. They are only present at the literal level of things, while the truth itself is by its nature not only incorporeal but also "free of the thickness of the words" (*μὴ συμπαχυνομένην ταῖς φωναῖς*). The only means by which we are able to rise above this literal level of meaning is by resorting to *theoria*.<sup>6</sup> And this is precisely what he does. He organizes his interpretation in several layers or cycles. First, he establishes what I deem to be an iconic relationship between different pairs of things. Second, he establishes what might be regarded as a symbolic relationship between a wider range of realities. In both cases, he

<sup>6</sup> PG 91: 1244B. In addition to Migne's edition I quote the latest edition and the English translation of the work, Maximus the Confessor, *On difficulties in the Church Fathers: the Ambigua*, trans. by Nicholas Constatas (Cambridge, Ma and London: Harvard University Press), 422-423. Maximus refers to this principle also later on in PG 91: 1252D; Constatas, *On difficulties*, 440-441. Kattan points out that the contradictions are apparent because the Holy Spirit himself is regarded by Maximus as the author of the Scripture. Assaad Kattan, *Verleiblichung und Synergie: Grundzüge der Bibelhermeneutik bei Maximus Confessor* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 219-20.

provides the context in which the title 'Forerunner' can be understood as rightly applied to John the Evangelist.

Maximus begins his spiritual contemplation by establishing an iconic relationship between several pairs of terms in which an icon represents an image of the reality which is already present or is yet to come. These pairs include: lamp and the sun; mind and reality; written Gospel and the eschatological knowledge; the Law and the Christ; Holy people and the Mystery of Christ. Inasmuch the Law represents a shadow of the Gospel which is proclaimed by Christ, the Gospel itself represents an icon of the world to come.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, in the context of iconic relationality Maximus situates another pair, that of John's Gospel and Christ's eschatological presence. As much as a lamp is yet but a temporary source of light compared to the light itself, i.e. the sun, or as holy men are portraying in this life the life of the Word to come, John's Gospel also represents an icon of the eschatological reality. It is for this very reason, Maximus argues, that by calling John 'the Forerunner' Gregory "... wanted to suggest [thereby] that the great Evangelist, by means of his Gospel, is the forerunner of a greater and more mystical Word, which he points to, but which cannot be expressed in letters nor uttered with sounds made by a tongue of flesh."<sup>8</sup>

This can be regarded as Maximus' final solution of the ambiguity which he states in a yet more crisp manner later on:

"For every word given by God to man and written down in this present age is a forerunner of the more perfect Word, which – through that word – is announced to the intellect, spiritually and without writing, and which will be manifested in the age to come, for whereas the written word possesses an indication of the truth in itself, it does not reveal the truth itself, naked and unveiled."<sup>9</sup>

However, he wouldn't have been true to himself and his hermeneutical style had he not offered a broader and complex thought structure which this quite simple solution is founded on. Therefore, in his second exegetical cycle he establishes goes even deeper, providing the iconic relationality with its own foundation, i.e. symbolic relationships which are held between: physical elements, bodily organs, senses, functions of the soul, virtues, types of philosophy and Gospels.

These relations can be best represented in a structured form as follows:

<sup>7</sup> Maximus establishes a qualitative difference between the shadow (σκία) and the icon (εἰκών) suggesting that the Logos is more fully present in the latter. However, as is rightly pointed out by Kattan, this difference cannot be universally applied to all of his writings. Cf. Kattan, *Verleiblichung und Synergie*, 180-2.

<sup>8</sup> παραινίξασθαι θέλειν, ὅτιπερ καὶ Ἰωάννης ὁ μέγας εὐαγγελιστὴς, ἐν τῷ κατ' αὐτὸν Εὐαγγελίῳ πρόδρομος ἐστὶ τοῦ δι' αὐτοῦ μηνυομένου μυστικωτέρου καὶ μείζονος Λόγου, καὶ γράμμασι τυπωθῆναι καὶ φωνῇ γλώσσης σαρκίνης ῥηθῆναι μὴ δυναμένου. *Amb.* 21.3 (PG 91: 1244C; Constan, *On the Difficulties*, 422-5).

<sup>9</sup> Πᾶς γὰρ λόγος θεόθεν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις κατὰ τὸν αἰῶνα τοῦτον γραφείς πρόδρομος ἐστὶ τοῦ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀγράφως ἐν πνεύματι κατὰ νοῦν μηνυομένου καὶ ἐς ὕστερον φανησομένου τελεωτέρου Λόγου, ὡς ἀλήθειαν μὲν ἔχων ἑαυτῷ μηνυομένην, οὐ μὴν δὲ αὐτὴν ἀπερικαλύπτως γυμνὴν δεικνὺς τῆς ἀλήθειαν. *Amb.* 21.13 (PG 91: 1252C-1252D; Constan, *On the Difficulties*, 440-1). For Maximus understanding of the difference between aeon and time see Vukašin Milićević, "A Contribution to the Understanding of the Mutual Definition of the Aeon and Time in Ambigua 10", *Philotheos* 17 (2017): 66-71.

Physical elements	Bodily organs	Senses	Functions of the soul	Virtues	Types of philosophy	Gospel
Ether	Eyes	Sight	Intellection	Understanding	Theology	John
Air	Ears	Hearing	Rationality	Courage	Natural philosophy	Luke
Water	Nose	Olfaction	Incensive power	Temperance	Practical philosophy	Mark
Earth	Taste	Taste	Desire	Justice	Faith	Matthew
		Touch	Vital force			

Before we dive into explaining these relations it should be noted that Maximus does not establish an explicit relationship between each and every category of the things listed in this table. The relationship is established between the physical elements, Gospels, virtues and the philosophy types, as well as between the bodily organs, senses, soul's functions and the virtues. However, by way of analogy it can be concluded that the same symbolic relationship holds across *all* of the mentioned categories. Maximus also struggles to fit all the elements in the proposed classification in an adequate manner. Hence, touch and the vital force are left floating in the vacuum since there are no corresponding elements in other categories. It should be further noted that the position of a row also signifies its place in the hierarchical ranking. Ether is more superior than air, water and earth, as much as sight is greater than touch, theology than natural philosophy, John's Gospel than any other etc.

How does this symbolic relationship work and what is its purpose? Since he established the *iconic* relationship between the John's Gospel and the Eschaton, he works out the path for understanding this Gospel to represent, as its most superior expression, the knowledge of God attainable in this world. The fourfold structure of the Gospel is perfectly fitting for those who are living in this world which is made of four elements, and whose organs, senses, soul functions and philosophical achievements are structured in a way that maintains this fourfold structure. If the soul functions properly, that is, in accordance with its nature, then it acquires virtues, most superior being understanding, and rises above all forms of philosophy to the contemplation of God, i.e. theology.<sup>10</sup> Symbolic relationship ties the created world together making it both as a whole and in its specific elements an icon of the Eschaton.

<sup>10</sup> *Amb.* 21.8 (PG 91: 1248C, Constatas, *On the Difficulties*, 430-1). Maximus also adds that the soul learns to combine these four virtues into two that are more general. So out of understanding and justice the soul fashions wisdom, and from courage and temperance it fashions gentleness. To go even further, the perfected soul draws these two virtues "into the most general virtue of all, by which I mean love" (εἰς τὴν τῶν πασῶν γενικωτάτην ἀρετὴν, φημί δὲ τὴν ἀγάπην). *Amb.* 21.9 (PG 91: 1249B; Constatas, *On the Difficulties*, 434-5).

This fourfold structure of the created reality with its own hierarchical relationships is established for one purpose: to provide the basis for the Gospel of John to be understood as both earthly and yet most superior form of knowledge of God. It represents the highest expression of the reality that we currently live in and its final attainment. It corresponds to the nature's highest elements, most noble virtues, most distinguished senses and the highest form of contemplation. As such, it represents the most complete expression of otherwise incomplete knowledge of God which is possible for a human to possess in this age. As an icon it primarily holds referential value, simultaneously revealing and hiding away its prototype.

In addition to this central explanation and in accordance with his exegetical style, Maximus offers interpretations which further expand the central one. First of all, he follows the lead provided by Gregory's calling John 'great voice of truth'. Instead of relating it to John the Baptist, who calls himself 'a voice of one crying in the wilderness' (Jn. 1: 23), Maximus associates it with the voice mixed with thunder and heard by the witnesses of Christ's ascension to Heaven (Jn. 12: 28-30). And to whom does Jesus refer as 'the son of thunder'? Of course, it is John the Apostle and his brother James who are called *Βοανηργές* by the Son of God (Mk. 3: 17). Thunder is precisely that kind of a sound which "induces solely astonishment in those who hear it, without explaining anything clearly, and this is precisely an elementary discourse".<sup>11</sup> This 'elementary discourse' (ὁ στοιχειώδης λόγος) is John's Gospel when compared to the truth which is to be revealed in the future.

On the other hand, Maximus argues that all saints can be called forerunners of Christ, since they prefigured through their lives and deeds. Therefore, each saint can stand in place of another and be called by his name. This interchangeability is evidenced by Jesus himself when he refers to John the Baptist as Elijah, to the Law as Moses, the prophetic books 'Prophets', or when the books of the Scripture are called by the names of their authors. In this manner, John the Baptist becomes metonymy for the entire Old Testament (Law and the Prophets) and John the Apostle becomes a metaphor for the New Testament which in itself is but a forerunner of the future goods.<sup>12</sup>

And finally, Maximus stretches the concept of 'the forerunner' to the maximum length. He claims that even divine Logos can be rightfully called 'the forerunner' of Himself:

"... consisted with the wisdom of our God-bearing teacher, the Word is called the forerunner of Himself, since He manifests Himself according to the measure of those who receive Him, in both the Old and the New Testament, in which the Word runs ahead of Himself through riddles, words, and figures, by which he leads us to a truth that exists without these things."<sup>13</sup>

In his becoming human the divine Logos has thus made Himself forerunner of His Second coming in which the fulness of truth will be revealed. The mysteries which are now present only as images are concealed until the Second coming because „the world cannot contain

<sup>11</sup> *Amb.* 21.13 (PG 91: 1252C; Constatas, *On the Difficulties*, 438-41).

<sup>12</sup> *Amb.* 21.14-15 (PG 91: 1252D-1253D; Constatas, *On the Difficulties*, 440-3).

<sup>13</sup> ὡς πρόδρομος ἑαυτοῦ πρὸς τοῦ θεοφόρου διδασκάλου προσηγόρευται νῦν, ὡς ἑαυτὸν ἀναλόγως τοῖς ὑποδεχομένοις κατὰ τε τὴν Παλαιὰν κατὰ τε τὴν Νέαν Διαθήκην ἐκφαίνων, δι' αἰνιγμάτων τε καὶ φωνῶν καὶ τύπων προτρέχων αὐτὸς ἑαυτοῦ, καὶ διὰ τούτων πρὸς τὴν χωρὶς τούτων ἄγωνα ἀλήθειαν. *Amb.* 21.15 (PG 91: 1253D-1256A; Constatas, *On the Difficulties*, 444-5).

them" (Jn 21, 25). This is why Gregory uses metonymy to designate by John's name the words which Jesus uttered to his disciples which are an icon and forerunners of the future glory.<sup>14</sup>

Before we make final remarks on St Maximus' interpretation of this ambiguity, we need to explore a possibility that St Gregory's naming of John the Evangelist as the Forerunner of the Word actually was a mistake made by either Gregory or some of those who transcribed his orations.

### A slip of a hand or a slip of a tongue?

Might it be that some of those who would later transcribe the manuscripts of Gregory's orations confused two Johns and added an epithet of the forerunner to the wrong one? This possibility seems excluded. In the critical edition of Gregory's orations prepared by Galley alternative reading of this sentence is not offered. Galley even offers an explanation stating that Gregory probably called the Evangelist the Forerunner since he prepared the revelation of the Logos in his Prologue.<sup>15</sup> He adds that Gregory was well aware that John the Baptist is the one usually called the Forerunner and refers to *Or.* 6.7.7-8 [SC 405: 138B]. We might also add that there are other occasions which prove this point [*Or.* 39.14; SC??], as well as that in one case the title of *πρόδρομος* is applied to the Holy Spirit, who in the scene of the annunciation (Lk. 1: 31) is perceived as the forerunner of Christ [*Or.* 31.29; SC???]. Therefore, we may conclude that this part of the oration is original and that this ambiguity was present in the text of the oration from the very beginning.

Is it possible though that Gregory himself made a mistake and confused the two Johns? That this was the case is argued by Andrew Louth:

"It does not occur to Maximus that Gregory, in the midst of his flights of rhetoric, might have forgotten for a moment to whom he was referring and thus confused the two Johns. No, what Gregory has said must stand, and Maximus is obliged to develop a complex explanation of how John the Evangelist, too, can be called 'the forerunner of the Word, the great voice of the Truth.'<sup>16</sup>

However, one might object that Gregory carefully revised and prepared his theological orations for publication. Therefore, had it happened that he made a mistake in his oral presentation he would have corrected it afterwards. The fact that Gregory prepared his theological orations before the oral delivery, envisaging them as a whole, and worked on the text is well known. The place of the *Oration* 28 in this publication was subject of a debate among scholars. Although there is a consensus that all of the orations were orally delivered, some scholars believe that this oration was placed between *Or.* 27 and *Or.* 29 later on, in the course of preparation of orations for written publication, and that it was done by Gregory himself. T. Sinko argues that he reworked the exordium of the *Or.* 28, connecting it to what was discussed in *Or.* 27, but failed to do the same for the introductory words of the *Or.* 29.<sup>17</sup> Bernardi

<sup>14</sup> *Amb.* 21.16 (PG 91: 1257A; Constat, *On the Difficulties*, 446-7).

<sup>15</sup> SC 250: 142, n. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Louth, "St Gregory the Theologian and St Maximus the Confessor: the shaping of tradition", in *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in honor of Maurice Wiles*, eds. S. Coakley and D. A. Pailin, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 119-20.

<sup>17</sup> Tadeusz Sinko, *De traditione orationum Gregorii Nazianzeni*, Vol. 1, 1917.

agrees with Sinko and also argues that in the reworking of the exordium Gregory incorporated a promulgation of the themes that will be discussed in the *Or.* 29-31 which adds to the pre-supposition that Gregory himself envisaged the five orations as a whole.<sup>18</sup> What is significant for the topic of this paper is that Bernardi limits Gregory's later editorial work on the oration to a couple of these small interventions in the exordium. However, he also remarks that the oration seems to be too long to have been delivered orally.<sup>19</sup> Norris, on the other hand, points out that *Or.* 31 is of a similar length, but that Bernardi did not question its oral presentation. He also questions other Sinko's and Bernardi's arguments and states that the *Or.* 28 as a whole, together with its exordium, was delivered as it is.<sup>20</sup>

So which conclusions can be drawn from this scholarly discussion? First of all, it may be reasonable to state that Gregory himself prepared the orations for the publications after he delivered them orally. He might have even corrected the text here and there, but it seems that the only potential, later interventions recognized by the scholars are the ones in the exordium of the *Or.* 28. In other words, Gregory might have reworked the introduction of the oration in order to make it more fit to be placed between *Or.* 27 and *Or.* 29. But even if he did so, as Sinko and Bernardi argue, he forgot to do the same for the *Or.* 29. This brings us to the conclusion that even if we accept their proposal that Gregory reworked the texts of the orations, he was not so much careful in doing so. Therefore, it seems plausible to suggest that the possibility that "in the midst of his flights of rhetoric" Gregory made a mistake which he did not correct later on cannot be excluded. It is worth noting that if it were the case that St Gregory confused the two persons of the same name, this would not have been the first time that he did so. In his *Or.* 24 he quite famously and quite tragically confused St Cyprian of Carthage and St Cyprian of Antioch. However, in this case he most certainly did so out of ignorance and not as a result of a *lapsus linguae*.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

What does this story about two Johns mystically united under the same title of 'the forerunner of the Logos' tell us about St Maximus' hermeneutical approach to the writings and authority of St Gregory the Theologian? First of all, as has been noted, we may conclude that St Maximus treats the text of Gregory's orations as divinely inspired in way not that dissimilar from the scriptural texts. He states that in the case of Pseudo-Denys the Areopagite and Gregory the Theologian, Christ himself "became the soul of their souls, manifest to all through all their deeds, words, and thoughts" (ψυχὴν αὐτοῖς τῆς ψυχῆς γεγεννημένον καὶ διὰ πάντων ἔργων τε καὶ λόγων καὶ νοημάτων πᾶσιν ἐμφανιζόμενον) and that, therefore, their words were actually "authored, not by them, but by Christ, who by grace has exchanged

<sup>18</sup> See Norris et al, *Faith gives Fulness*, 77.

<sup>19</sup> Jean Bernardi, *La prédication des pères cappadociens: le prédicateur et son auditoire* (Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de l'Université de Montpellier, 1968), 182. For the whole discussion see SC 250: 8-10; Norris et al, *Faith gives Fulness*, 76-8.

<sup>20</sup> Norris et al, *Faith gives Fulness*, 77-8.

<sup>21</sup> SC 284: 9-31, especially 21-4.



places with them" (ἐκείνων μὲν οὐκ εἶναι πεπεῖσθαι τὰ προταθέντα, Χριστοῦ δέ, τοῦ κατὰ χάριν αὐτοῖς ἑαυτὸν ὑπαλλάξαντος).<sup>22</sup> In his *Amb.* 19 he says that Gregory was inspired by the Holy Spirit *in the same fashion* as the prophets, so that his words might be considered also as prophecies.<sup>23</sup> As Conostas rightly points out, Maximus sets St Gregory the Theologian alongside King David, the apostle Paul "and even Christ himself".<sup>24</sup>

This leads us to the second point: the exegetical principles applied to the texts of the Holy Scriptures are the same ones applied to the texts of the Holy Fathers. And these don't seem to be different when he is dealing with the interpretation of the liturgical texts and actions as it can be seen in his *Mystagogy*. This approach implies that the possibility of a *lapsus* or a contradiction being contained in the text itself is excluded upfront. The Holy texts cannot contain errors or contradictions. On the other hand, if we form the impression of encountering them, then we are obliged to correct our approach to the text. The error lies within us and not within the text itself. As Aleksandar Đakovac notes:

"St Maximus' fidelity to the predecessors and the attempt to preserve their authority intact goes far as to bizarre yet brilliant attempts of interpreting even obvious slips of tongue or errors in transcription."<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, anything that resembles an error or a contradiction contained in the text of the Holy Scripture or that of a Holy Father for St Maximus is but a deception that can be cast away with a help of a proper exegetical approach.

Thirdly, we acknowledge that Maximus takes the opportunity provided by the apparent contradictions in the holy text to explore its deeper meaning and thereby develops *his own* theological insights. Text is used as a pretext for his own spiritual contemplation which in its own right becomes largely detached from the text which was its starting point. Starting from the patristic text he develops his own ideas about the ascetical aretology, cosmological iconology and the all-pervading presence of the divine Logos in the Scripture, Cosmos and Eschaton. To quote Đakovac again: „He constantly emphasizes his fidelity to the authorities from the past, repeats their statements which he then interprets giving them meaning which the original author most certainly did not have in mind.“<sup>26</sup>

Are we then to discard Maximus' attempt at interpreting the words of St Gregory since he neither feels obliged to follow the original intent of the author, nor did the author himself, in this particular case, probably had any particular intent in mistakenly confusing the two Johns? I believe we would be wrong to do so. This case provides us not only with precious insights in understanding the value that the authority of St Gregory posed for St Maximus, but also teaches about the immense potential of the patristic text to influence and inspire our theological thinking even when it is at its weakest point.

<sup>22</sup> *Amb. Th. Prolog.* 3 (PG 91: 1033A; Conostas, *On the Difficulties*, 4-5).

<sup>23</sup> *Amb.* 19.2 (PG 91: 1233C; Conostas, *On the Difficulties*, 402-403).

<sup>24</sup> Conostas, *On the Difficulties*, xiv.

<sup>25</sup> Александар Ђаковац, *Речено и неизрециво: дискурзивност азматске онтологије у апоретици Светог Максима Исповедника* (Београд: Православни богословски факултет, 2018), 20-1.

<sup>26</sup> Ђаковац, *Речено и неизрециво*, 159.

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