

# John Wesley and Macarius the Egyptian

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John Wesley went to Christ Church, Oxford, at the time of the early eighteenth-century patristic revival there. With others, including those in the "Holy Club," Wesley became interested in early Eastern Orthodox mystical writing, especially that of the fourth century.

In 1721, an English edition of the *Homilies* of Macarius was published and quickly came into Wesley's hands. From then on, both before and after Aldersgate in 1738, Wesley apparently returned periodically to Macarius. When he published his fifty-volume *Christian Library* around 1750, the first volume included his own substantial abridgement of a number of Macarius's fifty "Spiritual Homilies" (followed by his abridgement of the influential *True Christianity* by Johann Arndt, "the father of German Pietism," who was supposed to have known Macarius by heart).<sup>1</sup>

To set Wesley's interest in Macarius in context, we must note that Wesley also read a number of other Church fathers of the early Eastern tradition, as well as writings of various mystics in Western Christianity and writers on perfection of his own day. He was interested in anything (especially from 1725 on) which spoke of holiness and perfection.

Wesley's knowledge of Macarius seems to have been limited to the fifty homilies. He assumed he was reading the original work of an Egyptian desert father of the fourth century. But what was Wesley actually encountering when he read Macarius? This is a disputed question. Albert Outler and Werner Jaeger argued that "Macarius" was actually heavily dependent on Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330-395), and thus strongly reflects the most profound teaching on perfection in the Eastern tradition. Jaeger maintained that Macarius's "Great Letter" was, in fact, essentially a paraphrase of Gregory, and that the Macarius *Homilies* similarly rely heavily on Gregory's teachings.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Reinhart Staats has argued the opposite: that Gregory knew Macarius's "Great Letter" and incorporated it into his writings in edited form.<sup>3</sup>

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In any case, one can see substantial similarities between Macarius's perfection teachings in the *Homilies* and Gregory's teachings in *On Perfection*, the "Great Catechetical Oration" and other works. The significant point is that, in reading Macarius (and to some extent also Ephrem Syrus and other Eastern writers), Wesley was in contact with a tradition of teaching on perfection—a perfection ideal—that was Eastern rather than Western, that reached back before Augustine, and that represented the high point of Eastern ascetical teaching.

What were the elements in Macarius to which Wesley was particularly drawn? It is impossible to obtain great precision here, but one may gain clues through key ideas common to Gregory and the Macarian *Homilies*, through similarities between these and Wesley's teachings on Christian Perfection, and from Wesley's abridgement of the Macarian *Homilies*.

Rather than doing a technical theological analysis, I have chosen simply to highlight some key themes which occur in Gregory, Macarius and Wesley. We may note in particular seven themes common to both Gregory's teachings and the Macarian *Homilies* that significantly correspond with Wesley's thought.

1. *Salvation is seen fundamentally in terms of the restoration of the image of God.* Men and women are created in the image and likeness of God; there is that within them which corresponds to the divine nature. Therefore human nature can respond to God and, through Christ, the image of God can be restored. This is perfection. The importance of the Incarnation is not merely that it effects a cure for sin; it is a joining of the divine nature with human nature, a divinizing of human nature, so that the image of God can be restored. God became human so that human beings might become God. These ideas are worked out in some detail, of course, in Gregory, but are essentially present also in the Macarian *Homilies*.

2. *Human beings have free will*, the capacity for choosing the good and changing toward that which is perfect. Gregory said the image of God in persons meant, first of all, freedom to choose the good. From this, all other aspects of the image of God in man and woman are derived. God created humans with the possibility (capability) of choosing, moving toward and participating in God's work of perfection in human personality. Similarly, though in a less systematic way, Macarius places strong emphasis on free will and the necessity of striving.

A related theme is the possibility of the Christian's falling back into sin. Thus Macarius (as quoted by Wesley) says: "And if the mind but a little give way to unclean thoughts; lo, the spirits of error have entered in, and overturned all the beauties that were there, and laid the soul waste."<sup>4</sup>

3. *Perfection is participation in the divine Spirit.* Macarius speaks of participating in God; of partaking of the divine nature. Gregory speaks of participating in the divine names. Both teach that perfection is changing toward the better—"deification" in the Eastern sense. Jean Daniélou points out that a fundamental new insight is involved here: a positive evaluation of the possibility of change. Contrary to Platonic notions, even as seen in Origen, Gregory saw that the possibility of change in



human beings, rather than an indication of imperfection, was the necessary precondition for attaining perfection. Thus perfection is choosing, and changing toward, God's perfection. So, Gregory says, we can go from glory to glory—never ceasing to grow toward what is better, and never putting a limit on perfection. Speaking of "the revolution in thought which Gregory accomplished" at this point, Daniélou says, "This notion of a perpetual beginning, that is not merely a repetition but something always new and fresh, is one of Gregory's most germinal ideas."<sup>5</sup>

4. *Love is the supreme virtue in perfection.* Perfection is viewed in terms of the perfecting of love in persons. This is prominent in Gregory and Macarius, though more in an ascetic and mystical than in an ethical sense (although the ethical element is not totally absent).

5. *The Christian must strive to attain perfection.* Created in the image of God, the Christian has freedom of the will and has that within him or her which corresponds to God's nature. The Christian is a co-laborer, or co-operator, with God in the work of perfection. Gregory's theology is thus clearly synergistic and semi-Pelagian. It is not truly Pelagian, however, because Gregory emphasized the necessity of God's grace. It is God's grace—through creation (the image of God) and through the Incarnation and Atonement (the restoration of the image of God)—which enables the person to choose the good and cooperate with God in the work of perfection. This synergistic element is prominent in the Macarian *Homilies* and parallels Wesley's "evangelical synergism": God's grace saves us through faith and enables us to cooperate with God's sanctifying work in our lives.

6. *Christ is the Christian's model*—the one to be imitated—in this process of perfection. The idea of *imitatio Christi* is present in Gregory (and Macarius), though primarily in an ascetic, mystical sense. It is the perfection of the soul which is at issue. Gregory does not emphasize the imitation of Jesus' historical life so much as the imitation of his "spiritual" qualities. Here Wesley has more of an "inward and outward" balance, but the same Christo-centric focus.

Gregory's teaching of perfection thus is based on an ascetic ideal. Asceticism, separation from the world and mystical union with God are presented as the ideal of perfection. This is also very prominent in the Macarian *Homilies*.

7. Finally, *there is a universal aspect to Gregory's thought.* Christ's work is universal; in the Incarnation, God assumed all human nature; every person is the bearer of God's image and thus has the capacity for perfection. There is no notion here of the Augustinian idea of election and predestination.

All of this suggests an essentially positive and optimistic evaluation of the possibilities of grace in human personality—even though seriously constricted by the ascetic ideal. Two additional comments should be made at this point, however. First, Gregory put an emphasis on the sacraments which is not found in the Macarian *Homilies*. For Gregory, the life of perfection begins with incorporation

into Christ (and into the Church) through baptism and the Eucharist. This is foundational. But this element is largely absent from Macarius—which is to be expected if the Macarian *Homilies* do in fact trace back to individual or very small communities of desert ascetes.

Second, Macarius makes use at least once in the *Homilies* (in a passage included in Wesley's abridgement) of the image of the circumcision of the heart as representing the work of perfection in the human soul. So far as I know, Gregory does not use this image in this way, but it becomes one of the key metaphors in Wesley for the work of Christian perfection.<sup>6</sup>

This brings us to the question of the ways in which Macarius's thought may have contributed to Wesley's understanding of Christian perfection.

We may note first that nearly all the above elements occur in Wesley's thought. In his sermons, he frequently emphasized the restoration of God's image; the new birth was nearly always seen as beginning the process of perfection cast in these terms. Wesley's thought was clearly synergistic, but in an evangelical, semi-Pelagian rather than Pelagian sense, for Wesley stressed human depravity and the necessity of prevenient grace as a precondition for turning toward God. He taught a universal atonement and translated Zinzendorf: "Thou hast for all a ransom paid, for all a full atonement made" (in the hymn, "Jesus Thy Blood and Righteousness").

Especially important is the fact that for Wesley *love* was the essence of Christian perfection. He repeatedly defined perfection as loving God with all one's being and one's neighbor as one's self. A major point of difference, however, is that Wesley's stress on love and perfection, while still somewhat mystical and ascetic, was much more strongly ethical than was Gregory's and also was preached as an available experience—and the norm—for every Christian, not just for the spiritual elite. Wesley insisted on "all inward and outward holiness" as the norm for all.<sup>7</sup>

In the Eastern tradition, perfectionist teaching tended to be an elitist doctrine for those who would flee the world. Wesley, however, emphasized Christian life in the world and the necessity of doing "all the good you can." Also, Wesley came to believe a person could attain "entire sanctification" as a second definite experience after the new birth. He did not teach an absolute perfection or "sinless perfection," of course, since perfection for him was always a continuing process, not a state, and did not imply perfect knowledge or flawless behavior. Beneath his emphasis on a crisis experience of entire sanctification (as, indeed, beneath his emphasis on the new birth) was his conviction that all of life should be an ascent toward God which was continuously enabled by God's grace but always involved the cooperation of the human will.

Second, it is perhaps significant that Wesley's characteristic term for the work of sanctification was "Christian perfection"—even more than "sanctification" or "holiness." This underscores his indebtedness to the Eastern tradition, though of course "Christian perfection" was a common term and theme in England prior to Wesley.

Wesley's thought was very eclectic and was fed from many diverse sources.



Thus, whatever he learned from Macarius was modified by other (and sometimes conflicting) influences. In the light of this, I find it striking that so many ideas—and key, germinal ideas which cohere in a kind of constellation—found in Gregory and Macarius occur so clearly in Wesley. Granted, similar or complementary ideas may have come also from other sources; yet it seems clear that these ideas trace essentially back to the Eastern perfectionist tradition (and more foundationally, of course, to Scripture).

This raises the difficult question of "influence." I do not claim that Wesley simply "took over" this set of ideas from Macarius. Some of them he encountered elsewhere; some undoubtedly came to him through his own extensive study of Scripture; some were already present in the Anglican tradition; some were points of emphasis in the Pietist writings Wesley read (e.g., Arndt's *True Christianity* with its emphasis on the restoration of the image of God and the priority of love.<sup>8</sup>) But it is clear that the complex of ideas on perfection Wesley taught were at key points strikingly similar to those taught by Gregory and Macarius and that these ideas had a particularly strong appeal to Wesley and therefore made a distinctive contribution to his doctrine of perfection.

Incidentally, the emphasis on the sacraments in Gregory and Wesley—but not in Macarius—is interesting here. It seems likely that Wesley would have largely agreed with Gregory's teaching and stress on the sacraments had he been directly in touch with Gregory's writings.

Fundamentally, the significance of the Macarian contribution to Wesley lies in the emphasis on the potential of human personality for growth and positive change, and the capacity of the Christian to cooperate with God in the ongoing work of salvation. This gives a dynamic to Wesley's thought which acts as an impulse toward positive action in the present world. Christians live in a world governed by God's grace. We are unable ourselves, because of sin, to do any good thing. But God's grace has been universally shed abroad, thus freeing the Christian to cooperate with God in the work of redemption. Wesley took this germinal perspective, to a large degree freed it from the limitations of an ascetic ideal, and applied it across the board to common men and women of eighteenth-century England, coupling it with an emphasis on a life of practical good works. Some may argue that in the end he over-complicated the matter with his own specific theories and sometimes conflicting arguments. But he also apparently struck a chord with tens of thousands of people in his day and released a shackled potential for responsible human action: "faith working by love."

## Notes

1. See John Wesley, *A Christian Library: Consisting of Extracts from and Abridgements of the Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity which have been Published in the English Tongue*, 30 vols. (London: T. Cordeux, 1819). The original edition was in 50 volumes, vol. 1 published in Bristol in 1749. The extracts from Macarius are found on pp. 69-131 of the 1819 edition. See also Thomas E. Brigden, "Wesley and the Homilies of Macarius," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, 8 (March, 1911): 6-7.
2. Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 9-10, 31, 119; Werner Jaeger, *Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature: Gregory of Nyssa and Macarius* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965). Jaeger suggests that in Gregory's *De instituto christiano* "the theology of the Eastern Church reached the culminating point of its tendency to bring the two basic elements of the Christian religion, divine grace and human effort, into perfect balance" (p. 88).
3. See Randy L. Maddox, "John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy: Influences, Convergences and Differences" [in this volume of *The Asbury Theological Journal* (45 [Fall 1990], p. 29-53)].
4. Wesley, *Christian Library*, 1:120.
5. Jean Daniélou, *From Glory to Glory. Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings* (New York: Scribners, 1961), pp. 48, 69.
6. Wesley, *Christian Library*, 1:126 (Macarius, Homily 21); see, among other references, Wesley's sermon "The Circumcision of the Heart," Frank Baker, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 1:401-414.
7. "Inward and outward holiness" became practically a slogan for Wesley. Typical is his statement in the sermon "On Predestination": "God decrees from everlasting to everlasting that all who believe in the Son of his love shall be conformed to his image, shall be saved from all inward and outward sin, into all inward and outward holiness" (Baker, ed., *Works of John Wesley*, 2:418).
8. See Johann Arndt, *True Christianity*, ed. Peter Erb (New York: Paulist Press, 1979); Howard A. Snyder, *Signs of the Spirit: How God Reshapes the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), pp. 71-76.