

## Christian literary identity and rhetoric about style<sup>1</sup>

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*My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom...*<sup>2</sup> (1 Cor. 2.4-5)

### 1. Introduction

It has been well-established in recent scholarship how ‘rhetoric about rhetoric’ in antiquity set rhetoric and philosophy against each other. Many writers used this opposition to define their own identity and their artifice obscured the complex and often positive relationship which rhetoric and philosophy had in the ancient world.<sup>3</sup> This paper will argue that ‘rhetoric about literary style’ was used in similarly artful acts of self-definition. Just as they employed rhetoric about rhetoric, so early Christian writers used rhetoric about literary style in distinctive ways to define their own identity against each other and in relation to classical antiquity. A better understanding of this rhetoric helps us to understand claims about the nature of Christian speech, especially claims that Christians eschewed such ‘plausible’ or ‘persuasive’ words as might be used by skilled rhetoricians. As Paul’s words above suggest, questions about techniques of persuasion and sources of human wisdom are closely intertwined: here I focus on those techniques of persuasion which involve the choice of an appropriate literary style.

I will first give an overview of ancient theories of ‘style’, arguing that the opposition of ‘plain’ and ‘elaborate’ obscures a more complex picture. I will then use Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa as examples of the way in which fourth century Christian writers wrote about literary style. These erudite ‘Cappadocians’ are far from typical fourth-century Christians; nevertheless, they are a telling example of the way in which praise of Christian plain-talking could co-exist alongside not only the commendation of more sophisticated styles but also the identification of such styles in the Bible.

### 2. Kinds of ‘style’ (χαρακτήρες, ιδέαι, *genera dicendi*)

#### a. Complexity

Ancient theorists and modern commentators alike are united in agreeing that ancient theories of style are very complex – indeed, one second century author complains that previous

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<sup>2</sup> ἐν πειθοῦ σοφίας

<sup>3</sup> Hesk (1999), 201–30; Christian polemic: Vaggione (1993); DelCogliano and Radde-Gallwitz (2011), 44–46.

accounts are ‘totally muddled’.<sup>4</sup> As a more measured modern commentator puts it, because the various styles emerged as a result of a complex nexus of influences, the styles have ‘a distinctive flexibility and latitude of characterization’.<sup>5</sup> One problem, however, is that ancient discussions of style try to convey authority by attempting systematization: the result is frequently ‘technical but imprecise’.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, different commentators have their own distinctive systems: the famous tripartite classification of plain, middle and grand used by Cicero, for example, differs both from an earlier four-fold classification found in Demetrius *On Style* (c.2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE) and from an alternative three-fold classification of diction used by Dionysius of Halicarnassus (second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE)<sup>7</sup> Hermogenes’ complex theory of seven types of style (with twenty sub-types), developed in the second century CE, became very influential in Byzantium.<sup>8</sup>

A further difficulty is that the words used in rhetorical treatises or literary criticism for kinds of discourse (χαρακτήρες, ιδέαι, *genera dicendi*) do not map easily on to the modern concepts expressed by the English terms ‘style’ or ‘genre’.<sup>9</sup> They cannot refer to ‘genres’, for ancient theorists frequently stress that the best writers use a variety of styles within one work of a particular kind (e.g. forensic rhetoric); furthermore, the use of the term ‘genre’ for ancient texts is prone to anachronism.<sup>10</sup> As we will see, the ‘styles’ do not map neatly even on to particular literary forms: forensic rhetoric was associated with both the slender (‘low’) and the majestic (‘high’) styles, comedy with both slender and pleasant styles, tragedy with both pleasant and majestic styles. Furthermore, all three styles can be found in both poetry and prose forms. Furthermore, while the English term ‘style’ generally means ‘(features pertaining to) the form and mode of expression of a text, as opposed to what is said or expressed’, ancient discussions of literary χαρακτήρες/ιδέαι/*genera dicendi* relate both to ‘style’ and ‘content’.<sup>11</sup> For example, Demetrius’ *On Style* systematically discusses the different literary χαρακτήρες according to their thought (διάνοια), diction (λέξις) and composition (συνθέσις), all of which are relevant to certain subject-matter (πράγματα).<sup>12</sup> Such an understanding leads the author of *On the Sublime* to argue that a text can be

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<sup>4</sup> Hermogenes, *On Types of Style* (*Id.*), I:1 (Rabe, 216).

<sup>5</sup> Shuger (1984), 2; Russell (2006), 276: ‘The history of these concepts [i.e. types of writing] is extremely complicated and by no means fully known’.

<sup>6</sup> “technisch aber unpräziser”: Klock (1987), 15.

<sup>7</sup> Cicero, ‘Orator’ (*Or.*); Demetrius, ‘On Style’ (*Eloc.*); Dionysius, ‘Demosthenes’ (*Dem.*).

<sup>8</sup> Wooten (1987), xvii.

<sup>9</sup> Discussions of diction λέξις as one of the five classical parts of rhetoric are narrower than discussions of λέξις in works dedicated to the χαρακτήρες, ιδέαι, *genera dicendi*): Russell (2006), 275–76.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g. Davis (2002): 111; Rosenmeyer (2006), 421–39.

<sup>11</sup> *The New Shorter OED* (1993); Russell (2006), 277: ‘They are best described as tones or qualities of writing, involving the choice not only of words but of subject’.

<sup>12</sup> Hermogenes studies texts with regard to thought/content (έννοια), approach (μέθοδος: assimilate to figures of thought) and style, strictly understood (λέξις): Wooten (1987), xi.

sublime as to its subject-matter, even if its literary qualities are not very elevated.<sup>13</sup> For these reasons, Donald Russell suggests that the *χαρακτῆρες/ιδέαι/genera dicendi* 'are best described as tones or qualities of writing, involving the choice not only of words but of subject'.<sup>14</sup> I agree with Russell's argument, but prefer the terms 'moods' or 'sensibilities', because 'tone' or 'quality of writing' might still imply that one is not considering content.

Amid the bewildering evidence, it is tempting for the modern reader to impose her own system. As we shall see below, some scholars have seen a clear system emerging; others agree that, especially for Christians writing in Late Antiquity, 'there are as yet no generally accepted models that could help us to describe the precise relationship between the prose of these authors and the strata of language of the period they were writing in'.<sup>15</sup> The pattern suggested below attempts to steer a path between the two positions, and will keep flexibility to the fore. I will argue that it is possible to identify three 'moods' or 'sensibilities' evoked by texts, identified by three families of literary-critical terms.<sup>16</sup>

### *b. Three styles (χαρακτῆρες/ιδέαι/genera dicendi)*

#### (i) Slender

The word most commonly used in Greek for the slender style is *ἰσχνός* (literally: dry, thin, lean, weak, light).<sup>17</sup> *ἰσχνός* indicates compositions which are comparatively plain, concise and spare in their use of imagery, but also ones which are notable for their clarity (*τὸ σαφές*: often associated with vividness, *ἐναργεία*) and precision (*ἀκρίβεια* - sometimes associated with the quality of purity, flawlessness<sup>18</sup> or, more negatively, with a fastidious over-attention to detail<sup>19</sup>). The emphasis on clarity and precision means that the slender style is associated with life-like description, but also with the narration of everyday events – as if the slender style held a mirror up to life and reproduced it without distortion.<sup>20</sup> This style's association with everyday subject-matter and a somewhat conversational tone<sup>21</sup> meant that the style was sometimes praised as useful and educative<sup>22</sup> and at

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<sup>13</sup> Longinus, *Subl.* 9. Russell (2006), 277.

<sup>14</sup> Russell (2006), 277.

<sup>15</sup> Kinzig (1997), 647.

<sup>16</sup> I will focus on Greek terminology (some of which is used by e.g. Cicero and Quintilian), although there are Latin equivalents.

<sup>17</sup> Demetrius, *Eloc.* 190–239; Dionysius, *Dem.* 11, 15; Quintilian, *Inst.* XII.10.58; May (2007), 257.

<sup>18</sup> Dionysius *Dem.* 11–13 (the 'slender' aspects of Demosthenes' mixed discourse, have purity and precision).

<sup>19</sup> Longinus, *Subl.* 33.2, 35.2; Shuger (1984), 17: critiques of being too 'Attic'.

<sup>20</sup> Demetrius, *Eloc.* 209, 227.

<sup>21</sup> Demetrius, *Eloc.* 190, 192, 202, 230; Dionysius, *Dem.* 2, 15.

<sup>22</sup> Especially Quintilian, *Inst.* XII:10.59-60; Cicero, 'De optimo genere oratorum' (*Opt. gen.*) 1.3.

others disparaged for being too colloquial or commonplace.<sup>23</sup> The slender style can either teach an audience (through clarity in the court or classroom, or in a letter) or entertain them (through life-like accounts of everyday situations, especially through dialogue). The idea that a slender style can vividly but accurately represent a conversation explains why the slender style was associated both with comedy,<sup>24</sup> dialogue and letter-writing (which was commonly seen in the ancient world as a conversation committed to paper) and with dialectic.<sup>25</sup> The slender style is associated with Stoicism – but, as we shall see, it is *not* the only style associated with philosophy.<sup>26</sup> Nor, as the reference to comedy makes clear, is it associated *only* with philosophy or dialectic. In the sphere of oratory, it was sometimes associated with forensic speeches.<sup>27</sup> Dionysius and Cicero associate with this style the orator Lysias (445 – c. 380 BCE) a *logographos* (legal speech-writer) and one of the ‘ten Attic orators’ who were together regarded as paradigmatic for oratorical style.<sup>28</sup>

#### (ii) Pleasant

The pleasant style is often denoted by the Greek words ἀνθηρός (‘floral’) and γλαφυρός (which literally means ‘hollowed out’ or ‘smoothed’; it came to denote literary polish and elegance).<sup>29</sup> It is said to exhibit χάρις (grace or charm) and τὸ ἡδύ (sweetness or pleasantness).<sup>30</sup> Like the slender style, the pleasant style is often associated with clarity (and for Demetrius, relative brevity), although frequently the words denoting clarity also point towards the brightness or even brilliance of the composition.<sup>31</sup> The pleasant style is more complex and uses more carefully-worked sentence-construction, images and tropes,<sup>32</sup> with the result that, depending on the writer’s perspective, it can be described as delicate, smooth, polished, ornamented, or rich, tasteless, degenerate. It is very frequently associated with a euphonious, smoothly flowing choice of words, and with a lyrical or musical sensibility. Like the slender style, it can be directed in two different ways: to education (where it can achieve subtlety and philosophical finesse) and to entertainment, where it is especially associated with wit and playfulness. The pleasant style is therefore associated both with philosophy (Plato especially is cited as a model of the pleasant style, but so also is

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<sup>23</sup> Longinus *Subl.* 32–6.

<sup>24</sup> Shuger (1984), 13–14 on *Rhetorica ad Herennium*.

<sup>25</sup> Demetrius, *Eloc.* 223–4, 227; Shuger (1984), 6 (on Aristotle).

<sup>26</sup> Shuger (1984), 2, 15, 33.

<sup>27</sup> Dionysius, *Dem.* 2, 10; Shuger (1984), 20.

<sup>28</sup> Dionysius, *Dem.* 2, 9; Longinus, *Subl.* 32–6; Shuger (1984), 17, 22–25, 29. Lysias as an example of a more polished, witty style: Demetrius, *Eloc.* 186–9, 259.

<sup>29</sup> Russell (2006), 276. For a fuller discussion of the characteristics of this style, see Ludlow, (2018).

<sup>30</sup> Demetrius, *Eloc.* 127–31; Dionysius, *Dem.* 4–5, 11–13; Quintilian, *Inst.* XII:10.59–60, 64.

<sup>31</sup> Demetrius, *Eloc.* 137–8.

<sup>32</sup> Demetrius, *Eloc.* 139–162, 176–185; Shuger (1984), 16 (citing Cicero, *Brutus (Brut.)* 301–20) and 25–26 (on Dionysius).

Aristotle) and with comedy.<sup>33</sup> When the style is associated with charm and grace it is connected with lyric poetry, especially that of Sappho, and with rhetorical forms such as the marriage-speech; the pared-down and more life-like tragedy of Euripides could also be said to demonstrate the pleasant style.<sup>34</sup> The common-denominator here seems to be the sense that the pleasant style can influence or persuade the audience through its aesthetic qualities: it achieves the ‘leading of the soul’ (ψυχαγωγία).<sup>35</sup> There is more emphasis on emotion, while the plain style has more emphasis on reason – although this disjunction should not be over-played, because Plato was regarded as an exemplar of the pleasant style. With regard to oratory, this style is sometimes associated with epideictic and with the works of Isocrates.<sup>36</sup>

(iii) Majestic or sublime<sup>37</sup>

The majestic style is often denoted by Greek words indicating greatness (e.g. μεγαλοπρεπής magnificent, μεγαλοφυής of noble nature, μεγαληγορία ‘great-talking’ and μεγαλοφωνία ‘grandiloquence’ and their cognates).<sup>38</sup> Other terms indicate bulk (ὄγκος, ἄδρός)<sup>39</sup> or height (especially ὑψηλός sublime)<sup>40</sup>. The style is used to talk about weighty matters, such as the gods, the natural world or investigations into human nature.<sup>41</sup> Emotion is used alongside argument to persuade an audience (in forensic and deliberative rhetoric) or in narrative or drama to affect them (in epic, history and tragedy). The authors often associated with this style are Aeschylus, Thucydides and sometimes Demosthenes.<sup>42</sup> Compared to the pleasant style’s use of relatively restrained emotion (delight and charm) the majestic style is generally associated with more intense, if not violent, emotions.<sup>43</sup> But these emotions are within the bounds of dignity (σεμνότης), otherwise the style becomes inappropriate.

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<sup>33</sup> Plato: Demetrius, *Eloc.* 183–5: ‘Plato’s works glide smoothly along’; Dionysius, *Dem.* 3, 5–6, 15; Shuger (1984), 31 (on Longinus). Aristotle: Demetrius, *Eloc.* 128, 154; Shuger (1984), 15–19 (on Cicero), 26 (on Dionysius). Comedy: Demetrius, *Eloc.* 142–3, 152–3, 159, 161–9.

<sup>34</sup> Sappho: Demetrius, *Eloc.* 132, 140–42, 148–49 (also used as an example of sublimity: Longinus, *Subl.* 10.1); Euripides: Shuger (1984), 10–12, 36.

<sup>35</sup> ψυχαγωγία: Plato, *Phaedrus* 261a. Shuger (1984), 35.

<sup>36</sup> Isocrates: Dionysius, *Dem.* 3.

<sup>37</sup> Here I elide two categories in Demetrius’ analysis: the forceful and the grand.

<sup>38</sup> μεγαλοπρεπής Demetrius, *Eloc.* 37, 39. Dionysius, *Thucydides* (*Thuc.*), 23. μεγαλοφυής Longinus, *Subl.* 9.1, 13.2, 34.4, 36.4. μεγαληγορία: Dionysius, *Thucydides*, 27; Demetrius, *Eloc.* 29; Longinus, *Subl.* 8.4.

<sup>39</sup> ὄγκος Demetrius, *Eloc.* 77, 120, 247; Longinus, *Subl.* 8.3, 39.3. ἄδρός Quintilian, *Inst.* XII.10.58-9.

<sup>40</sup> Passim in Longinus, *Subl.*

<sup>41</sup> Demetrius, *Eloc.* 75-6; Dionysius, *Dem.* 1-2.

<sup>42</sup> Aeschylus: Aristophanes, *Frogs*, passim; Demetrius, *Eloc.* 267. Thucydides: Demetrius, *Eloc.* 39, 44, 48, 112; Dionysius, *Dem.* 1, 9, 15.

<sup>43</sup> Shuger (1984), 9 (on Aristophanes’ estimation of Aeschylus); Demetrius, *Eloc.* 99 (terror, awe); Cicero, *Brut.* 55.203 (the orator evokes tragic emotions); Quintilian, *Inst.* VI.11.16-19; Dionysius, *Dem.* 2.

Although there is an intensification of emotional force from the slender to the pleasant and then to the majestic style, there is not a corresponding increasing complexity of sentence-structure, nor necessarily a greater sophistication of imagery. For Cicero, the majestic style was like archaic art – sketchy and unsophisticated, yet very effective in its overall impact – while the pleasant style was more like later classical painting – detailed and with bright colours.<sup>44</sup> Dionysius called the majestic style ‘striking, elaborate, obscure, and terrifying’ with ‘an intense intellectual and emotional excitement which startles the mind, inducing tension, and violent emotion’.<sup>45</sup> These qualities are communicated through a style which uses short phrases, asymmetry and surprising juxtapositions: in other words, the sentence-structure is *less* complex and less highly-worked than that of the pleasant style.<sup>46</sup> So, it is tempting, but unsatisfactory to map the styles as points on a universally-accepted ascending scale. Indeed, although the terms ‘grand’, ‘majestic’ or ‘sublime’ suggest that this style was the highest or best, as some ancient theorists such as Longinus argued, others clearly preferred a middle style because it reached a wider audience.<sup>47</sup>

*c. The appropriate - τὸ πρέπον*

In sum, these *χαρακτῆρες*, *ιδέαι* or *genera dicendi* relate to three fairly distinct ‘moods’ or ‘sensibilities’. They are used to evoke spareness, precision and clarity; or elegance, brilliance and charm; or high emotion and sublimity. The mood or sensibility evoked identified by ancient authors with certain typical key terms – like *ἰσχνός*, *ἐναργεία*; *γλαφυρός*, *χάρις*, *ἡδύ*; *μεγαληγορία*, *ὄγκος*, *ὑψηλός* – which became buzz-words applied to both style and subject-matter. Crucially these moods were directly related to certain kinds of emotional effect: the astonishment provoked by the majestic, the pleasant luring of the elegant style and the satisfaction brought by the clarity of the slender style. Two or more different moods could be evident in a single text, but each was especially appropriate to and could therefore evoke certain contexts and certain kinds of subject-matter. Ancient audiences educated in the classics would have had an instinctive sensitivity to them and would have been able to ‘tune in’ to them by picking up on certain indicators almost subconsciously (just as experienced modern readers quickly grasp that an author is working with the conventions of gothic horror or the campus novel). Ancient Christian authors educated in the classics would have shared this instinctive sensitivity.

For these reasons, scholars such as Innes and Russell have argued that ‘the fundamental criterion [of style] is propriety, τὸ πρέπον: certain subjects fit certain styles, and violation of this is

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<sup>44</sup> Shuger (1984), 15–16.

<sup>45</sup> Shuger (1984), 24.

<sup>46</sup> Shuger (1984), 25.

<sup>47</sup> Dionysius, *Dem.* 15.

normally a fault.... Since the choice of style depends on appropriate subject-matter, all the styles are equally valid...'.<sup>48</sup> Since understandings of mood were assumed to be universal and instinctive, 'breaches of etiquette, such as a low word in a solemn context, [were greeted] with horror and disgust'.<sup>49</sup> This concern with propriety or fit suggests that many ancient theorists were in effect identifying various virtues, rather than levels of style: like Aristotelian ethical virtues, each excellence of style is to be used as appropriate to context.<sup>50</sup> This helps with understanding what theorists have to say about combining styles. It is common (especially in Latin writers) to associate the slender style with imparting information ('teach'), the pleasant with pleasing or conciliating ('delight') and the grand with appealing to the emotions ('move').<sup>51</sup> It might be tempting, then, to associate them respectively with forensic, epideictic, and political rhetoric; in fact, however, rhetorical theorists frequently praise the flexible use of different styles as appropriate throughout a single work. For example, Hermogenes admires Demosthenes precisely because 'he was always combining styles everywhere', so that his deliberative speeches contained elements of judicial and epideictic rhetoric too.<sup>52</sup> Dionysius of Halicarnassus argues that especially Demosthenes, but also Isocrates and Plato exemplify the best style which is not 'middle' in the sense of in between, but in the sense of being a mix of the plain and grand styles.<sup>53</sup> Quintilian is equally positive about the value of mixing styles:

Eloquence therefore takes many forms; but it is very foolish to ask which of them the orator should take as his standard. Every variety which is correct has its use, and what is commonly called a 'style' (*genus dicendi*) is not something that *belongs* to the orator. He will use *all* 'styles', as circumstances demand, and as required not only by the Cause as a whole but by its various parts...He will make many changes of tone (*multa mutabit*) to accord with differences of persons, places and circumstances.<sup>54</sup>

The excellence of an orator, then lies in being able to use specific styles as appropriate, for in that way he will reach his audience. Dionysius specifically argues that a mix of styles is best because it appeals to a broad audience: those who attend the assemblies and law-courts are neither hyper-intellectuals with minds like Thucydides (the master of grandiloquent style); nor are they simpletons who do not understand what a well-composed speech is. 'They are a collection of men

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<sup>48</sup> Innes (1995), 324 (citing Demetrius, Aristophanes and Cicero); cf Russell (2001), 10–11.

<sup>49</sup> Russell (2006), 278.

<sup>50</sup> Wooten (1987), xvii (on Theophrastus and Hermogenes). The relation between kinds and virtues of style is not clear-cut: Russell (2006), 276–77.

<sup>51</sup> Quintilian, *Inst.* XII.10.59.

<sup>52</sup> Hermogenes, *Id.* I.1.

<sup>53</sup> Dionysius, *Dem.* 3–6, 9, 15–17.

<sup>54</sup> Quintilian, *Inst.* XII.10.69-71. See also: Cicero, *Brut.*, 185; *Orator*, 69; *Opt. gen.*, I.3.

who work on the land and the sea, and common tradesmen, whose sympathies are most readily won with a comparatively straightforward and ordinary style of oratory'.<sup>55</sup>

*d. The rhetorical deployment of literary terms.*

Such advice points us back to the inherent complexity and fluidity of ancient concepts of 'style': if the fundamental rule is 'be appropriate', then there could in principle be as many styles as kinds of context or subject-matter. Most critics, however, (ancient and modern) have grouped them in some way or other, although they are divided on how this should be done. Donald Russell argues that, 'most often we hear of three 'styles': ἄδρός ('grand'), ἰσχνός ('thin'), and some kind of intermediate – either a desirable mean between the two extremes or a distinct 'ornamental' or 'smooth' style (γλαφυρός, ἀνθηρός).'<sup>56</sup> An earlier strong tendency in modern scholarship, however, was to assume a fundamental two-fold theory of ancient style. For example, G. L. Hendrickson (writing in 1905) concluded:

it becomes clear that our styles (whether three or more) represent a fundamental two-fold analysis, so that the pre-eminence awarded to the grand style is merely recognition of its original character as artistic prose, in contrast to language purely as a vehicle of thought.<sup>57</sup>

He argues that while previous modern scholars considered plain, rational prose (especially as used in philosophy) to be superior to artistic, emotional prose (in rhetoric), this is not how the matter was seen in the ancient world.<sup>58</sup>

Hendrickson's argument, published in 1905, was influenced by Eduard Norden's 1898 division of Greek prose into plain and 'artistic prose' (*Kunstprosa*)<sup>59</sup>: together their view-point dominated German-speaking and Anglophone scholarship respectively. Although hugely influential, Norden's and Hendrickson's position did not, however, completely wipe out scholarly antipathy to 'artistic' Greek prose. There remained a continuing suspicion of 'Asianist' style and the rhetoric emanating from the 'Second Sophistic', due to the way in which some ancient authors opposed this

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<sup>55</sup> ἀπλούστερον καὶ κοινότερον διαλεγόμενος: Dionysius, *Dem.* 15. My emphasis.

<sup>56</sup> Russell (2006), 276; cf Innes (1995), 325.

<sup>57</sup> Hendrickson (1905), 289. Shuger rejects his elision of the 'grand' and 'middle' styles, but herself stresses a 'plain-and-middle' vs 'grand' binary opposition in order to argue for 'the actual pre-eminence of the grand style', by showing its 'range and intellectual seriousness': Shuger (1984), 2.

<sup>58</sup> Hendrickson (1905), 289–90.

<sup>59</sup> Norden (1898).



to plain, clear, Attic prose.<sup>60</sup> This tendency is very evident in early twentieth century patristic scholars who denied, criticised or were puzzled by certain early Christian writers' lapses into what they clearly consider to be decadent prose style.<sup>61</sup> One line of argument is that elaborate speech is an exception to the rule of Christian simple speech – the *sermo piscatorius* of Peter and the early disciples, which was inherited by later fathers.<sup>62</sup> Others have argued that the use of more elaborate style was unconscious or due to the power of cultural influences: thus, Gregory of Nyssa was supposedly unable to resist the effects of his rhetorical training, while the more robust Basil was able to overcome them.<sup>63</sup>

Such estimations are reinforced by the fact that (as we shall see below) ancient writers sometimes themselves drew apparently sharp contrasts between, for example, good plain style and fancy but useless prose. The question is how these should be read. As Tim Whitmarsh has argued, 'The authors of technical treatises were not simply transcribing universally accepted cultural norms into written forms, but attempting to prescribe, authoritatively, their own partisan views of what constituted correct practice'.<sup>64</sup> Many scholarly claims about ancient comments on style, however, read them as descriptive analyses, rather than as the rhetorical efforts of authors positioning themselves in a competition about excellence and moral probity. The very nature of the notion of 'the appropriate' left plenty of scope for argument. One result of the argument was that the three-fold *genera dicendi* were collapsed for rhetorical effect into binary oppositions – especially in debates about 'plain' Atticism and 'elaborate' Asianism.<sup>65</sup>

Acts of competitive literary (self-)definition naturally lead to the creation of binaries. Advocates of a slender style contrasted themselves with inappropriately decorative and decadently emotional styles. Those espousing sublimity accused any other style of being trivial. Proponents of the pleasant style defended it against elaborate pomposity and – on another occasion – could boast of the appropriately graceful use of ornament, compared to an opponent's bare aridity. But scraping beneath the surface we can see that these binaries were also based on comparison – 'this is better than that' – as Dionysius' advocacy of 'a comparatively straightforward and ordinary style of oratory' shows. Thus, despite the blunt way they were often presented, the binaries were

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<sup>60</sup> See Whitmarsh (2001 and 2005).

<sup>61</sup> A trend excellently described in relation to Chrysostom by Mitchell (2002), 23-6.

<sup>62</sup> Kinzig (1997), 639, with references.

<sup>63</sup> Aubineau (1971), 93; comparison with Basil: Méridier (1906), 6.

<sup>64</sup> Whitmarsh, (2005), 41; my emphasis.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, 53-4.

comparative, not absolute and this is a further reason why they should not be read as comprising a theory of style.<sup>66</sup>

Whitmarsh is careful to show that such rhetorical positioning occurs within a particular socio-political context. While Whitmarsh has analysed Greek writers in the Roman Empire, others have made a similar point with regard to Latin poets in relation to their Greek antecedents: thus Gregson Davis notes the fluid relationship between ‘the ancient theory of levels or “characters” of style’ and ‘normative literary kinds (epic, lyric etc.)’. As a result generic boundaries ‘are a rhetorical artefact: they constitute a conventional point of reference that poets use in order to define their own unique artistic space. Crucial to these acts of self-definition are rhetorical strategies that foreground the issue of stylistic decorum’.<sup>67</sup>

For scholars of early Christianity, this raises the question: should we not understand Christian acts of literary self-positioning with regard to style as rhetorically-heightened discourse which emerges from a specific socio-political context?<sup>68</sup> In what follows I will argue that Christian authors shared the same kinds of concerns about ‘stylistic decorum’ as their non-Christian contemporaries and forbears. If the fundamental rule of good style is ‘be appropriate’ and at least three literary sensibilities can be identified, we can understand Christians’ use of binary oppositions as the deliberate rhetorical simplification of more complex literary theory. Instead of reading Christian literary self-positioning in relation to a blunt opposition of ‘plain’ and ‘elaborate’ (often assimilated by scholars to ‘Christianity’ vs ‘Hellenism’), we can see it as a comparative exercise, continually seeking to validate good Christian writing as the more (or most) appropriate in relation to a particular theme or context.

### **3. The Cappadocians: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa**

#### *a. The Bible and literary style*

It is a common-place in modern scholarly writing on Late Antique attitudes to the Christian Bible that not only was it written in (or translated into) *koine* Greek, but it was regarded by both Christians and others as displaying a simple, plain or even bad style.<sup>69</sup> Following Eduard Norden some scholars have pointed out that a few Christian writers bucked the trend to assert that the Bible

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<sup>66</sup> This argument, moving beyond Whitmarsh, is substantiated with regard to Christian writers, in part 3 below.

<sup>67</sup> Davis (2002), 111.

<sup>68</sup> Others have made this point emphatically with regard to Christian use of rhetoric in general (see especially Cameron (1994) ).

<sup>69</sup> Kinzig (1997), 634-6 gives ample examples.

did have good literary qualities,<sup>70</sup> but this exception has been applied mainly to the poetic books of the Old Testament.<sup>71</sup> However, even a relatively cursory acquaintance with the Cappadocians' biblical hermeneutics allows us to add considerably more nuance and texture to this view, if one is aware both of the concept of mood or sensibility set out in the first half of this paper and of the way in which the articulation of these sensibilities was subject to its own rhetoric. By looking for the literary buzzwords I identified in the first part of my paper, we can see that Basil and the two Gregories identify instances of plain, pleasant and magnificent sensibilities in the Bible. However, they do not consider these completely distinct realms of discourse. Rather, their use of comparative vocabulary shows that they frequently analyse literary features of a text in order to judge how appropriate they are.

(i) The 'simplicity of faith'

Basil's and Gregory of Nyssa's texts against Eunomius of Cyzicus include significant polemic, not least against his literary style.<sup>72</sup> Eunomius and his writing are criticised using terms associated specifically with the majestic style: he is guilty of ὑπερβολή (meaning both moral excess and literary hyperbole) and Basil imagines him claiming sublimity in a parody of the sublime style: 'I have ascended to the very pinnacle of virtue, transcended earthly matters, and transferred my entire way of life to heaven!'.<sup>73</sup> Gregory of Nyssa implies (in terms closely echoing ancient literary criticism) that Eunomius aspires to Demosthenic magnificence, but fails: he achieves emotional excess, rather than intensity and his prose is heavy or distended. His logic is muddled: if he persuades it is not through argument and his claim to precision (ἀκρίβεια – a feature of the 'slender' style) is specious.<sup>74</sup> Mostly, the Cappadocians compare Eunomius' bombast with their own clarity, but at times they implicitly or explicitly contrast his prose with that of the Bible. For example, in the same pages where he criticises Eunomius' swollen style, Basil states that David 'plainly' (φανερῶς) confesses that the knowledge of God is inaccessible and the Apostle [Paul] 'clearly' (σαφῶς) condemns those who are swollen with pride.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Norden (1898), 526: some writers took the other route - that is 'to refer to the alleged artistic perfection of Holy Scripture' ('sich auf eine angeblich künstlerische Vollendung der h. Schrift zu berufen'). cf Kinzig (1997), 635–36.

<sup>71</sup> Socrates' comments on Paul in *HE* 3:16:23-26: Kinzig (1997), 635–36.

<sup>72</sup> E.g. Cassin (2008 and 2012); Ludlow (2014); DelCogliano and Radde-Gallwitz (2011), 39–46.

<sup>73</sup> Basil, *Eun.* I:3. ὑπερβολή and the magnificent style: Demetrius, *Eloc.* 52.

<sup>74</sup> Ludlow (2014), 455–59.

<sup>75</sup> Basil, *Eun.* I:12; I:3 (citing 1 Tim. 3.6). Norden and later commentators cite a passage in Nyssen's *Contra Eunomium* as evidence of a contrast between Eunomius' elaborate and Paul's plain style; the critical edition reveals that 'Paul' is a minority reading and the passage probably refers to Basil! Gregory of Nyssa, *Eun.* I.1.18 (GNO I.27:23); Norden (1898), 501; Kinzig (1997), 635, n.4.

The Cappadocians also contrast Eunomius' arrogance with the 'simplicity of the faith'<sup>76</sup> and this notion of faith is found frequently elsewhere: in Oration 32, Gregory of Nazianzus stresses that faith can be grasped by all; likewise, Gregory of Nyssa argues that 'The word of *sound faith* (Tit. 1.13, 2.2) conveys its strength in simplicity to those who welcome the God-inspired utterances with a good disposition. It has no need of subtle interpretation to assist its truth'.<sup>77</sup> Basil characterises the cosmology of Genesis 1.1 as 'the simplicity of faith' compared to the 'demonstrations of reason' – that is, classical philosophy.<sup>78</sup> Sometimes, they suggest the simplicity of faith is matched by a simple Christian style: Nazianzen argues that the faith is not just for 'sophisticates and those with a flair for language and logic'; better, in fact, is the man 'poor in words and understanding, who uses simple expressions and clings to them as to a flimsy raft in his effort to survive'.<sup>79</sup> But, read in its context, this is advice to his addressees, not a description of biblical style. Indeed, while the Cappadocians are quick to assert that the essential message of the gospel is simple to grasp, they seem to avoid asserting that the Bible itself has a simple or plain style. One reason for their hesitation is their belief that in many places Scripture teaches through puzzles (ἐν αἰνίγμασι: Sirach 39.3; cf ἐν αἰνίγματι 1 Cor. 13.2): even though the message may be simple, it is not always presented in a simple way.<sup>80</sup> This, of course, is the basis of allegorical or spiritual exegesis, which is practised by all three, but in different ways and to different extents. A different kind of evidence is Gregory of Nazianzus' mnemonic poems: the metrical lists of books of the Bible, plagues, the ten commandments, the parables and miracles in the gospels, and so on, are self-evidently ways of simplifying texts which are complex, at least from the perspective of narrative.<sup>81</sup>

In sum, although the Cappadocians do praise unadorned style, they usually do so in contrast to Eunomius' or others' intellectual pretensions: that is, they are clearly drawing a rhetorical contrast between more and less elaborate prose and – crucially – are condemning inappropriately elaborate prose. When it comes to the Bible, they do not comment specifically on whether it is finely-wrought prose or not: they think that its fundamental message is simple, even though it is presented through a complex variety of narratives and often in enigmatic ways.

## (ii) Majestic or sublime

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<sup>76</sup> e.g. Basil, *Eun.* I:1 and 4; Gregory of Nyssa, *Eun.* III.1.85 (GNO II.33); see also: Basil, *Spir.* 9:22; *Ep.* 258:2; Gregory of Nyssa, *Ep.* 5:9; *Thaum.* PG46.901.27; Gregory of Nazianzus, *De vita sua* 602.

<sup>77</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 32:26; Gregory of Nyssa, *Ep.* 24:1, 4.

<sup>78</sup> Basil, *hex.* I.10.

<sup>79</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 32:26.

<sup>80</sup> Of many examples, see, e.g. Gregory of Nyssa *Cant.* Pref. GNO 6.REF.REF; Hom. 11, GNO 6.324.18. Gregory of Nazianzus *Or.* 28.20.

<sup>81</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Poems on Scripture* (ed. and tr. Dunkle); and Dunkle's introduction, 17, 20-3.

We noted above that literary criticism uses words beginning *μεγαλο-* to signal sublime discourse. The Cappadocians are clearly aware of this terminology: for example, Basil says that Aeschylus ‘lamented with mighty voice’ (*μεγαλοφώνως ὠδύρατο*).<sup>82</sup> Nyssen’s devastating critique of Eunomius’ style reveals that he was aware of the terms used to describe the majestic prose that Eunomius was vainly trying to emulate.<sup>83</sup> In playful mode, Gregory of Nazianzus mocks Basil’s magnificent and tragic style; but he and Nyssen also use the same terminology (*μεγαλοφωνία* and cognates) for sincere praise of Basil’s powerful rhetoric.<sup>84</sup>

But do the Cappadocians use this kind of language when discussing the Bible? They certainly use epithets beginning *μεγαλο-* to denote various authors, especially Paul and John the Evangelist. In his Homily on John 1, Basil claims that ‘every utterance (*φωνή*) of the Gospels is nobler (*μεγαλοφουεστέρα*) than the other teachings of the Spirit’ and John is the most ‘resounding’ (*μεγαλοφωνότατος*) of the evangelists: his utterances are ‘greater (*μείζονα*) than every ear [can bear] and higher than every thought (*πάσης δὲ διανοίας ὑψηλότερα*)’.<sup>85</sup> For Gregory of Nyssa, John is ὁ ὑψηλὸς Ἰωάννης.<sup>86</sup> Just as Demosthenes was associated with a ‘flash of lightning or a thunderbolt’, so Basil associates the hugeness of John’s utterances with his name, son of thunder (ὁ υἱὸς τῆς βροντῆς; cf Mark 3:17) and Gregory says that John has a thundering voice (*ἡ βρονταία φωνή*).<sup>87</sup> For Gregory of Nyssa, the apostle Paul possesses ‘ἀποστολικῆς μεγαλοφωνίας’; Basil’s comments on Rom. 11.33 (which Paul ‘shouts out’: *ἐξεβόησε*) suggests he agrees.<sup>88</sup> Nazianzen singles out Isaiah as ‘the most grandiloquent of the prophets’ (*τῷ μεγαλοφωνοτάτῳ τῶν προφητῶν*) and praises the ‘most grandiloquent David (*τοῦ μεγαλοφωνοτάτου Δαβίδ*)’, who rouses one’s conscience ‘just like a herald of great voice booming an important proclamation’ (*τις μεγαλοφωνότατος κήρυξ ἀπὸ ὑψηλοῦ καὶ πανδήμου κηρύγματος*).<sup>89</sup>

The Cappadocians use a similar range of language to describe certain passages or books of the Bible. Evoking both Ps. 54.7 and the winged soul in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Gregory of Nyssa writes of the Lord’s Prayer: ‘Who will give me those wings [of a dove] that my mind may wing its way up to

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<sup>82</sup> Basil, *Ep.* 74 (ed/tr. Ferrari, p.72-3); cf Gregory of Nazianzus’ parody of Hesiod: *Or.* 4.115.

<sup>83</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Eun.* I.551; II.409; cf Basil *Eun.* 2:14; Ludlow (2014).

<sup>84</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epp.* 5:4:3; 46:5:4; *Or.* 43:68; Gregory of Nyssa *Bas* 2:3; cf *Op hom*, Pref. (PG44:125.50).

<sup>85</sup> Basil, *In Joh.* 1, PG31.472.25.

<sup>86</sup> ‘Sublime John’: Gregory of Nyssa, *Eun.* III.1.13; 1.36; 6.40; 8.40; 9.38. See also: Basil, *Eun.* II.27; Gregory of Nyssa, *Eun.* III.2.23; III.9.16.

<sup>87</sup> Longinus, *Subl.* 12.4. Basil, *In Joh.* 1, PG31.472.26; Gregory of Nyssa, *Eun.* III:2:16. cf Gregory of Nazianzus: both ‘sons of thunder’ had *μεγαλοφωνία*: *Or.* 18:24; 43:76.

<sup>88</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Eun.* III:1:108; cf III.3.39 and III.10.9; Basil, *Eun.* I.12.

<sup>89</sup> Gregory Nazianzus, *Or.* 4.1 (cf Basil *Eun.* 1:12); *Or.* 19.4; *Or.* 14.21.

the heights (τῷ ὕψει) of those noble words (τῆς τῶν ῥημάτων μεγαλοφυΐας)?<sup>90</sup> He emphasises that Christian teaching in general and the contents of scripture in particular are ‘noble’ (μεγαλοφυΐς – a word used by Longinus to denote the sublime or magnificent sensibility).<sup>91</sup> For Gregory, the Lord’s Prayer evokes sublimity and the Psalms and Ecclesiastes contain sublime thoughts (τὰ ὑψηλὰ νοήματα).<sup>92</sup>

In particular, the Cappadocians emphasise the emotional impact of a magnificent sensibility. For example, Basil says that the thought of Genesis 1:1 demonstrates astonishing profundity (βάθος): ‘If such is the forecourt of the sanctuary, if the portico of the temple is so grand and magnificent (σεμνὰ καὶ ὑπέρογκα), if the splendour of its beauty (τῆ ὑπερβολῆ τοῦ κάλλους) thus dazzles (περιαστράπτοντα) the eyes of the soul, what will be the holy of holies?’<sup>93</sup> In the famous opening of his sixth homily on the beatitudes, Gregory of Nyssa writes of the spiritual vertigo caused by the Lord’s sublime voice (ἐκ τῆς ὑψηλῆς τοῦ Κυρίου φωνῆς).<sup>94</sup> For Basil, the proof of John’s sublimity is that even those outside the faith are amazed by it.<sup>95</sup>

It is possible that the Cappadocians knew of Longinus’ use of Genesis 1:3 as an example of sublimity which lies in a concept or ‘bare idea itself’ (ψιλὴ ἔννοια), more than in the way it is expressed.<sup>96</sup> In any case, it is perhaps not surprising to find the Cappadocians praising the sublime content of the Bible, as distinct from other features which might pertain to a majestic sensibility. However, although they have less to say about vocabulary or sentence-structure in the Bible, there are hints that they believed the expression of certain ideas to be majestic or sublime. Thus Basil comments on the sublime delivery of God’s words at Jesus’ baptism, ‘This is my beloved Son’ (Matt 3.17): ‘the God of majesty thundered from above with a mighty voice of testimony’.<sup>97</sup> Gregory of Nyssa attributes sublimity to the diction of Isa 40.12: ‘Do you observe the magnificent language of the one who describes the ineffable power (μεγαλοφυΐαν τοῦ τὴν ἄφραστον διαγράφοντος

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<sup>90</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Or dom* II GNO VII/2.22.21-2

<sup>91</sup> Longinus, *Subl.* 9.1; 13.2; 34.4 (of Demosthenes); 36.4.; Gregory of Nyssa *Eun.* I.587; *Beat* GNO VII/2.122.11; *Or dom* GNO VII/2.61.9-14; *Cant* GNO VI.165.4; cf Basil, *hom. in Ps.* PG29.281.14 (tr. Way, 93).

<sup>92</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscr* GNO V.25-6 (tr. Heine, I.1:5 and 6, p.84), GNO V.29-30, 33 (tr. Heine, I.3.17 and 23, p.87-8, 91); *Eccl* GNO V.277.3; *Or dom* GNO VII/2.22.16-23.11.

<sup>93</sup> Basil, *hex.* I.1 and 2; II.2.

<sup>94</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat* VI.1, GNO VII/2.136-7, especially 137.10, 24-5 for his soul’s dizziness (ἰλιγγιᾶ, τὸν ἰλιγγον). Cf Basil, *Eun* I.12 (tr. Radde-Gallwitz, 109): Paul’s words reflect his being dizzied ‘by the vastness of what he contemplated’.

<sup>95</sup> e.g. Basil, *In Joh.* 1, PG31.472 (θαυμάσαντας, ἐθαύμασε, καταπλαγῆναι, etc.); cf Gregory of Nazianzus’ reaction to attempting to put theology into words: *Poemata Arcana* 6.27-46.

<sup>96</sup> Heath (1999).

<sup>97</sup> ὁ δὲ Θεὸς τῆς δόξης τῆ μεγαλοφωνία τῆς μαρτυρίας ἄνωθεν ἐπεβρόντησε. Basil, *hom in Ps.* PG29.289.44 (tr. Way, 200); he connects the μεγαλοφωνία of God’s voice with thunder, another mark of the sublime: *ibid.* PG29.292.21 (tr. Way, 201); cf Gregory of Nazianzus on the loudness and magnificence of Jesus’ words at the raising of Lazarus: *Or.*40.33.

δύναμιν)? ....The prophetic word has with such eloquence (ἐν ταῖς τοιαύταις μεγαληγορίαις) described [it]...'.<sup>98</sup> He also praises the way in which the ascending order of the text contributes to the sublimity of the Psalms.<sup>99</sup> The Cappadocians do not attribute a complex and highly-worked sentence-structure to the magnificent sensibility but, as we have seen, nor did ancient literary critics. Magnificence was often associated with archaic, impressionistic, somewhat uneven prose and it would be reasonable to see such a style in the Greek of the LXX and the NT.

The Cappadocians' repeated assertion that human thoughts can never encapsulate God's transcendent nature somewhat undercuts their affirmation of Scripture's sublimity. Commenting on Eccl 1.8, 'Words are too weak to express heavenly things', Gregory of Nyssa writes that 'every lofty expression and grandiloquence is a sort of speechlessness and silence (πᾶσα ὑψηγορία τε καὶ μεγαλοφωνία ἀφασία τίς ἐστι καὶ σιωπή)', compared to God.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, Isaiah's eloquence captures a part of the divine activity, but not its source and although Paul inundates the reader with his eloquence it is like a mere dewdrop compared to the true Word of God.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, all these statements reiterate the idea that this discourse still evokes a magnificent sensibility – indeed, this is how it leads its audience upwards to God.<sup>102</sup> In sum, Scripture's magnificence is comparative, not absolute.

Indeed, much of what the Cappadocians wrote about magnificence is comparative (or superlative). The Gospels' discourse is 'nobler (μεγαλοφουεστέρα)' than that of the rest of the Bible; John, Paul or Isaiah are 'the most grandiloquent'. Eunomius attempts a more sublime style than Basil (but fails). Thus, the Cappadocians are identifying the presence of a magnificent literary sensibility to varying degrees, but none of these claims is absolute. It might seem contradictory for Gregory of Nyssa to claim in one text that Basil's written style is plain (which allows the pure unadulterated truth to shine out beautifully)<sup>103</sup> and in another that Basil's sublime discourse matches the sublime ordering of the universe recounted in Genesis.<sup>104</sup> But both claims depend on an implicit comparison heightened for rhetorical effect: Basil's discourse is both clearer than Eunomius' and more sublime than many of his contemporaries.

### (iii) Pleasant

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<sup>98</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat* VII.1, GNO VII/2.150.22-5.

<sup>99</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscr* GNO V.159 (tr. Heine, II.15 (244) ).

<sup>100</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Eccl* 293.20.

<sup>101</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat* VII.1 (GNO VII/2.50.22-27); *Cant* Hom. 11 (GNO VI.326.11-17).

<sup>102</sup> E.g. Gregory of Nyssa, *Eun* II.242.

<sup>103</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Eun* I.1.18: 'Basil, true servant of the Word, adorned only by the truth, thought it shameful to clothe speech (= the word) in ornamentation, and taught us to aim at the truth alone'.

<sup>104</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Op hom*, Pref. (PG44:125.50): τὴν ὑψηλὴν τοῦ παντὸς διακόσμησιν; τὸ ὑψηλὸν στόμα.

As we saw above, the pleasant sensibility is denoted in ancient literary criticism in terms which suggest decoration, polish, brilliance and clarity; it brings charm, sweetness or pleasure to the audience and has the power to lead the soul. The Cappadocians seem to be familiar with this range of vocabulary. For example, Gregory of Nyssa mocks Eunomius' attempt at a polished 'Attic' style:

[He] so delicately fashions (ἀβρύνει) his own writing with brilliant style (τῆ λαμπρότητι τῆς ἐρμηνείας) ... adorning his account with this speech surpassing fair (ἐν τῇ περιττῇ ταύτῃ καλλιεπείᾳ τὴν συγγραφὴν ἀγλαΐζων), as immediately to seize the hearer with delight (ἡδονῆ) at the words. [Gregory quotes Eunomius.] See the flowers of ancient Attica! How sparkles in the work's composing an easy brilliance of style! With what elegance and variety (γλαφυρῶς καὶ ποικίλως) is its verbal beauty wreathed (περιανθίζεται)!<sup>105</sup>

Just as Eunomius tries and fails to emulate magnificent and pleasant speech, so Basil is praised for his success at both. Thus, while Gregory of Nazianzus remembers not only his sublimity, but also the charm, pleasure and delight (χάρις, ἡδονή, τρυφή) he gave to his congregations.<sup>106</sup> The Cappadocians appear to associate such qualities especially with letter-writing: a typical example is Basil's thanks for a letter which brought sweetness and charm (ἡδὺ, χάριν).<sup>107</sup>

Gregory of Nyssa seems to associate the pleasant style with particular topics (especially weddings, gardens and pastoral themes).<sup>108</sup> Thus, for example, he reminds his readers that a preacher must speak in a manner fitting the occasion (προσφυῶς τοῖς πράγμασιν), just as a rhetor would also use fitting and polished (γλαφυρῶν) words.<sup>109</sup> Basil and especially Gregory of Nazianzus focus more on positioning the pleasant style as a moderate mode of discourse. An early letter from Basil advises ascetics in his community 'observe good measure in both speaking and listening' (μέτρα ὀρίζοντα λόγῳ καὶ ἀκουῆ), using words associated with the pleasant style to describe this middle way: γλυκύν, τὸ ἡδὺ.<sup>110</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus' advice to letter-writers has a similar tone. Good letters have three main virtues: brevity, clarity and grace (ἡ χάρις). They must be of a length appropriate to the occasion and topic, and more like a conversation than a formal speech. Should this seem somewhat plain, Gregory reminds his reader that they should not be lacking in adornment (ἀκαλλώπιστα) or they will be dry and graceless (ξηρὰ καὶ ἀχάριστα). One can use various figures by which prose is sweetened (καταγλυκαίνεται), but not to self-indulgent excess. The crucial thing

<sup>105</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Eun* I.1.481-2.

<sup>106</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Or.* 43.66.

<sup>107</sup> Basil, *Ep.* 100 (tr. Deferrari, vol. II, p.183).

<sup>108</sup> Ludlow, (2018 and 2014).

<sup>109</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Sanct Pasch*, GNO IX.247.11-12; 17-18.

<sup>110</sup> Basil, *Ep.* 2 (tr. Deferrari, Vol 1, p.19).



about this style of letter (like Dionysius' mixed style) is that it convinces both the simple and the educated reader.<sup>111</sup>

With regard to Scripture, it is very clear that the Cappadocians thought that at least some of the poetic works of the Old Testament evoked a pleasant sensibility. Throughout his commentary on the Song of Songs, Gregory uses language associated with the pleasant style to describe the words of Scripture. Most boldly, he suggests the words of the lover/the Word himself evokes this style in order to lead the soul on to higher things:

The Word (ὁ λόγος) thus speaks with elegance in its account (ἀβρύνεται τῇ ὑπογραφῇ) of springtime's beauty, both casting out gloom and dwelling fondly upon accounts of things that afford more pleasure (τοῖς γλυκυτέροις διηγήμασιν). It is best, though, I think, that our understanding not come to rest in the account of these sweet things (τῇ τῶν γλαφυρῶν τούτων ὑπογραφῇ) but rather journey by their help toward the mysteries that these oracles reveal, so that the treasure of the ideas hidden in the words may be brought to light.<sup>112</sup>

The pleasant style would seem appropriate to the subject matter of the Song – love, gardens and pastoral themes. Similarly, there are hints that Gregory thinks that those parts of Ecclesiastes which describe gardens and beautiful things have this sensibility.<sup>113</sup> It may be for a similar reason that Basil associates parts of the creation narrative with a pleasant sensibility. While the account of the first day evokes sublimity, that of the second and successive days 'pleases and delights all the friends of truth'; thus Basil can write of the 'grace of Scripture' (τὴν χάριν τῶν γεγραμμένων) and the 'charm of truth (τὸ ἐκ τῆς ἀληθείας ἡδὺ) which the Psalmist expresses so emphatically when he says, "How sweet (γλυκέα) are thy words unto my taste, yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth" '.<sup>114</sup>

The Psalms, on the other hand, are pleasant, not because of their subject-matter, but because of their effect. According to Basil, the Holy Spirit mixed 'the delight of melody... with the doctrines' like 'wise physicians who, when giving the fastidious rather bitter things to drink, frequently smear the cup with honey'; for Gregory, David had, as it were 'poured the pleasantness of honey over sublime teachings'.<sup>115</sup> They denote the pleasantness of the Psalms with various words which resonate with terms used in literary criticism about the pleasant style: ἡδονή, τὸ τερπνόν, τὸ προσηνές, τὸ λείον, κόσμος, χάρις, τέρψις, γλύκειος.<sup>116</sup> There are some differences of emphasis:

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<sup>111</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ep.* 51.4-5.

<sup>112</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Cant Hom.* V (GNO VI 146,13 - 147,5).

<sup>113</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Ecccl* GNO V.331-334.3.

<sup>114</sup> Basil, hex, III.1.

<sup>115</sup> Basil, *hom. in Ps.* 1:1; Gregory of Nyssa *Inscr* GNO V.33 (tr. Heine III:23, p.91).

<sup>116</sup> *ibid.*

Basil justifies the mode of the Psalms by repeated insistence on the usefulness of their teachings,<sup>117</sup> while Gregory suggests that the apparently frivolous musical mode is justified because it makes palatable a content which is sublime (τῶν ὑψηλῶν δογμάτων).<sup>118</sup> He also explains that the Psalms are not like lyric poems in the classical Greek tradition,<sup>119</sup> especially because, although the Psalms use tone, they are chanted rather than sung. David, Gregory argues, used a ‘simple and unelaborate’ chant (ἀκατάσκευόν τε καὶ ἀνεπιτήδευτον). Therefore, in both Basil’s repeated insistence on usefulness, and in Gregory’s careful attempts to distance the psalms from inappropriate modes of music, one can see teachers who are well-educated in the literary sensibilities of the day educating their audience in how to place the Psalms in relation to them: the Psalms give pleasure, but they are a moderate and appropriate form of discourse – appropriate even (perhaps especially) for women and children.<sup>120</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions

The scholarly debate about early Christian literary ‘style’ has tended to assume a contrast between plain and elaborate discourse, with a particular focus on carefully-worked figures and sentence composition. However, this was not everything that was meant by literary *χαρακτήρες/ιδέαι/genera dicendi*. Following scholars such as Russell and Innes, I have posited three ‘styles’, and have suggested they are best understood as moods or sensibilities, each with their appropriate subject-matter (πράγματα), ideas (διάνοια), language (λέξις) and composition (συνθέσις). Furthermore, I have argued that the opposition of plain and elaborate discourse in ancient sources is a rhetorical opposition used in literary self-positioning. One finds this rhetoric both in arguments about ‘Atticism’ from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE onwards and in contrasts between the *sermo piscatorius* of the Gospels and elaborate ‘Hellenist’ discourse. We have seen it displayed in the Cappadocians’ rhetorical positioning of their own style as plainer and clearer than that of Eunomius.

But this rhetorical binary of (good) plain speech versus (bad) elaborate speech is not the sum of the Cappadocians’ concept of literary style. There is clear evidence that they were not only aware of, but trained to observe and use all three sensibilities or *genera dicendi* noted above. Not only do they use these categories to critique their contemporaries, but they identify passages of the Bible –

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<sup>117</sup> Basil, *hom. in Ps.* 1:2.

<sup>118</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscr GNO V.34* (tr. Heine III:25, p.92); cf Basil’s references to ‘promises of glory, an unveiling of mysteries’: Basil, *hom. in Ps.* 1:2.

<sup>119</sup> *Inscr GNO V.34* (tr. Heine III:25, p.92).

<sup>120</sup> The psalms are an ornament to women: Basil, *hom. in Ps.* 1:2.

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in both Old and New Testaments – as examples of the pleasant and the majestic styles. They appear more hesitant to declare biblical prose as slender or plain, although they declare that the faith itself (the *διάνοια* of Scripture) is simple for all to grasp. Once released from an over-emphasis on sentence-construction (*συνθέσις*) in one's understanding of 'style', the modern reader can see these early Christian literary critics noting places where the biblical texts uses ideas, figures and images which fit the pleasant or majestic sensibilities and describing how they effectively evoke the appropriate emotions. For the Cappadocians, at least, then, there is very little evidence that they thought there was a clear distinction between an 'elaborate' discourse of the classical greats and a 'plain and simple' biblical discourse. In whatever they read, they identified the mood and judged whether appropriate means had been used to evoke it.

An understanding of ancient literary 'styles' as broad sensibilities and a recognition of the role of rhetorical literary positioning has helped us work towards a more nuanced appreciation of what the Cappadocians have to say about literary 'style' and the bible. It is likely that similar research on, for example, Origen, John Chrysostom and Theodoret would also pay dividends. Scholarly claims about the fathers' attitude to plain biblical discourse have been based on a relatively small corpus of quotations which have tended to be studied outside their rhetorical context. Although such oppositions appear to oppose the bible and classical culture, in fact the plain-elaborate opposition is itself part of a broader rhetoric about style in classical and late antiquity which sits across more complex theories of style. Future research could fruitfully investigate whether other writers than the Cappadocians apply these more nuanced concepts of sensibility and the appropriate to the biblical text. It might also be valuable to ask what is at stake in modern scholars' perpetuation of the rhetoric of 'plain' Christian versus 'elaborate' classical style.