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# GREGORY THE GREAT

*John Moorhead*

THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

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Gregory's life culminated in his holding the office of pope (590–604). He is generally regarded as one of the outstanding figures in the long line of popes, and by the late ninth century had come to be known as 'the Great'. He played a critical role in the history of his time, and is regarded as one of the four great fathers of the Western Church, alongside Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine.

This volume provides an introduction to Gregory the Great's life and works and to the most fascinating areas of his thinking. It includes English translations of his influential writings on such topics as the interpretation of the Bible and human personality types. These works show Gregory communicating what seem to be abstruse ideas to ordinary people, and they remain highly current today.

**John Moorhead** teaches late antiquity and medieval history at the University of Queensland, Australia, where he is McCaughey Professor of History. His publications include *Theoderic in Italy* (1992), *Ambrose of Milan* (1999) and *The Roman Empire Divided* (2001).

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Edited by Carol Harrison

*University of Durham*

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First published 2005
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

"To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk."

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permission in writing from the publishers.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*
Moorhead, John, 1948–
Gregory the Great / John Moorhead.
p. cm. – (The early church fathers)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Gregory I, Pope, ca. 540–604. 2. Theology. I. Gregory I, Pope,
ca. 540–604. Selections. English. 2005. II. Title. III. Series.
BR65.G56M66 2005
270.2'092–dc22 2004017572

ISBN 0-203-01263-1 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0–415–23389–5 (hbk)
ISBN 0–415–23390–9 (pbk)

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# ABBREVIATIONS

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| | |
|---|---|
| *CCSL* | *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* |
| *Dial.* | *Dialogorum libri iv* |
| *Ep ad Leand.* | (Letter to bishop Leander introducing *Moralia*) |
| *Hev.* | *Homiliae xl in Evangelia* |
| *Hez.* | *Homiliae in Hiezechihelem* |
| *In CC* | *Expositio in Canticum Canticorum* |
| *MGH Ep.* | *Monumenta Germaniae Historica Epistolae* |
| *Mor.* | *Moralia sive Expositio in Iob* |
| *PG* | *Patrologia Graeca* |
| *PL* | *Patrologia Latina* |
| *Reg.* | *Registrum Epistolarum* |
| *Reg. past.* | *Regula pastoralis* |

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# 1

# INTRODUCTION

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The voice of Gregory the Great is a strange one, which speaks in accents alien to the modern West. Yet his works reveal great intellectual ambition, his *Moralia in Iob* being among the longest books to have been written in Latin at the time of its composition; the response to them was extraordinarily immediate, widespread and enthusiastic; and the sustained interest taken in them during the centuries which followed Gregory's life has made him one of the most influential authors ever to have written in the West. Moreover, his books were not the products of an idle mind but written during the exercise of very demanding duties. Such considerations suggest that it may be worthwhile coming to terms with his achievement. Even in his strangeness, Gregory may speak to modern readers.

## Life and deeds

Gregory's life culminated in his holding the office of pope (590–604). He is generally regarded as one of the outstanding figures in the long line of popes, and by the late ninth century had come to be known as 'the Great', a title which is still applied to him. Yet he was unusual among the popes of late antiquity. These tended to be men of no great social standing who acceded to papal office on the basis of seniority among the clergy of Rome. Gregory, however, came from an established and wealthy family, and became heir to a large home on the Clivus Scauri, just opposite the Circus Maximus, which can still be seen in Rome.[1] The family had strong church connections. Gregory was a great-great-grandson of an earlier pope, Felix III (483–92), and may have been related to another holder of that office, Agapetus I (535–36). His father, Gordianus, was an employee of the Roman church, three of whose sisters became nuns, although one later scandalized her nephew by marrying.[2] We do not know the year of Gregory's birth, but

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in about 573 he was holding public office, perhaps the important post of prefect of the city of Rome. However, following the death of his father, he turned the family home into a monastery, and established six monasteries in Sicily on the family estates. The gesture was a common one in the period: we know of monasteries founded in various parts of Italy not long before by two other men who had been administrators, Cassiodorus and Liberius, as well as the general Belisarius. But Gregory went one step further than many founders of religious houses by becoming a monk himself. He entered the monastery at Rome and devoted himself to monastic life with the utmost seriousness. He was in contact with some of the disciples of St Benedict, who some decades earlier had written what was to be the most important Rule in western monasticism. His followers had fled to Rome following the destruction of their monastery at Monte Casino by Lombards in about 585. Gregory's dealings with them were to be of great importance in the fame of St Benedict, and his enthusiasm for the earlier monk suggests the importance of such ideals in his own life. In years to come, after he had been forced to abandon monastic life, he looked back with nostalgia on life in his monastery.

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His family origins, secular career and monastic state make Gregory stand apart from most popes of the period. Yet he became marked for preferment in the Roman church. He was made deacon, that is a member of the clergy holding the rank from which popes were generally selected, and pope Pelagius II (579–90) used his talents in attempting a rapprochement with a group in Italy who had broken away from communion with Rome over what were called the Three Chapters, a body of texts which had been condemned, wrongly according to the schismatics, at the Council of Constantinople in 553. In about 579/580 Pelagius pulled Gregory out of his monastery and sent him to Constantinople, seat of the emperor, as papal ambassador, or apocrisiarius. While in the city, in many ways more central than Rome in the Christian world of the time, he developed a network of friends and acquaintances, although he did not learn Greek. This failure is a little hard to account for, particularly in a diplomat, but for much of the sixth century Constantinople was the most important city for Latin letters, and it may have been quite possible to discharge his duties without the need to learn the language which had come to predominate in the city.[3] A few decades later this would have been much more difficult. His diplomatic activities are unknown to us, but it is reasonable to suppose that Gregory exerted himself to try to gain military aid for Italy, then suffering from a group of Germanic newcomers, the Lombards, but the resources of the empire were stretched,

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this, the situation of Italy at that time was parlous. It was a bad time to come to the exercise of authority.

At the beginning of the sixth century, Italy had enjoyed peace and a degree of prosperity under the long rule of Theoderic, king of the Germanic Ostrogoths (493–526). But in 535 it was invaded by an army sent by the emperor Justinian to bring it back under the control of the Roman Empire, the capital of which was now Constantinople. The war between the Ostrogoths and the Empire lasted for some twenty years, devastating the countryside and disrupting social organization. Rome suffered from repeated sieges, and during 546 the city lay uninhabited for forty days. The final victory of the imperial forces left Italy dangerously open to the attentions of another Germanic group, the Lombards. In 568, under their king Alboin, they made their way into Italy, and by force of arms steadily established themselves over most of the peninsula. Their advent and settlement, marked as it was by continuing military conflict, widespread expropriations of land, and a degree of religious persecution, the Lombards being sometimes of an anti-catholic disposition, were much more violent than that of the Ostrogoths had been.[5] In the opinion of Gregory, the race of the Lombards was simply 'most unspeakable'.[6]

Yet he had to deal with them. During late antiquity, bishops had come to shoulder heavy burdens of leadership in secular affairs; just a few decades earlier, for example, bishop Paulinus of Aquileia is said to have responded to a Lombard threat by the dramatic step of leading his people to a more secure settlement.[7] Moreover, it took something like a month for a message to pass from Rome to Constantinople, and the Empire was involved in intermittent warfare with its old enemy Persia and pressing military difficulties of a new kind in the Balkans, so that Italy, which had so enticed Justinian, suddenly became a secondary concern. The official responsible for Italy, the exarch, did his best with few resources from his base in Ravenna, a town due north of Rome on the Adriatic coast, but his priorities were not always those of the bishop of Rome; what seemed like judicious compromise to a pope could look like treason to a servant of the emperor. And it had become clear during the sixth century that emperors looked on papal office in a way very different from the way the popes themselves did. In 537 pope Silverius had been deposed by the imperial authorities; his successor, Vigilius, who owed his appointment to the patronage of the empress, was later arrested and taken to Constantinople, which he was not to leave for ten years, while the following pope, Pelagius I, was an imperial nominee. The omens for relations between Gregory and Maurice were not good.

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As it happened, Gregory became pope at a time of new leadership among the Lombards. Just two months after his consecration, Agilulf became their king, ruling from the northern town of Pavia, while the following year saw duke Ariulf installed at Spoleto, a town dangerously placed some 100 km to the north of Rome from which he was able to control traffic along the Via Flaminia, the traditional route between Ravenna and Rome, and another new duke at Benevento in the south of Italy. Before long, Gregory had to cope with attacks from Ariulf. In a way which must have been utterly uncongenial to someone who had already lamented the need to become involved in secular affairs, he now found himself organizing supplies and overseeing the movements of troops. In July 592 he concluded a peace with the duke of Spoleto, and in 593, when king Agilulf besieged Rome, Gregory was said to have met him on the steps of S Peter's and prevailed upon him to leave. In 595 he chose to pick a quarrel over the assumption by the bishop of Constantinople of the title 'universal patriarch'. To the emperor's claim that Gregory was a fool he replied, thinking of one of his heroes from the Bible, that in this respect he was like Job (*Reg*. 5.36), and in a passage of wonderful hyperbole he expressed himself on the secular and ecclesiastical situations:

> Behold, all things in the regions of Europe have been handed over to barbarians, cities have been destroyed, fortifications overthrown, provinces depopulated, no cultivators occupy the land, idol worshippers rage and lord it over the faithful every day to the point of killing them; and nevertheless priests, who should be throwing themselves onto the ground weeping with ashes, seek for themselves empty titles and take glory in new and profane words (*Reg*. 5.37).

Gregory was furious at the assumption of the title, although by this time it was scarcely 'new', seeing it as diabolical arrogance and a sign of the coming of the Antichrist, but the sustained campaign he waged against its use by the patriarch, like a number of his operations, could make no headway; such failures are a reminder of the weakness of papal authority in the period. The vehemence of his response suggests it touched something very deep, and later we shall note the importance of pride in Gregory's thinking.

However, in important respects the situation in Italy improved as Gregory's pontificate continued. Towards the end of 598 peace was concluded between the Empire and the Lombards, although trouble would rumble on. He was able to cultivate a Bavarian catholic,

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Theodelinda, who, being successively the wife of kings Authari and Agilulf, turned out to be an influential queen of the Lombards, sending her a copy of one of his books. He rejoiced when Adaloald, the heir to the Lombard throne, was baptized a catholic in 603.[8] In 602 Phocas, an unsavoury soldier, overthrew the emperor Maurice, with whom Gregory's relations had often been cool, and acceded to the throne, a development at which the pope professed hearty satisfaction. By the time of his death in March 604, Gregory could look with a degree of satisfaction on the affairs of Italy and the Empire.

As the bishop of the city, Gregory had particular oversight over Rome, which was by no means immune from the difficulties which faced Italy.[9] Preaching at a particularly difficult time, Gregory wondered whether there was anything in the world which could give pleasure. Everywhere there were things to grieve at and groans to be heard. Cities had been destroyed, fortifications overthrown, fields depopulated, and the land turned into a wilderness.[10] There was now no senate in Rome and its people were perishing; the few people who were left had to endure greater sufferings every day. In its old age, the eagle, formerly the symbol of Roman power, had become bald.[11] The misery of the times prompted Gregory to speculate concerning the end of the world. He discussed the signs expected to precede this at the start of a homily preached to the people of Rome a few months after he became pope, which was placed at the beginning of his collection of homilies on the Gospels. Grimly, Gregory worked his way through a list given by Jesus: nation was rising up against nation and there was distress of nations on the earth more than in the past; earthquakes were destroying countless cities in other parts of the world; there were incessant plagues; although signs in the sun and moon and stars were not yet clearly to be seen, a change in the air showed that they were not far off; and while as yet there was no roaring of the sea and waves, the accomplishment of many of these signs left no doubt that the few which remained would follow (*Hev.* 1.1). At the end the Judge would come, to punish evil people and reward the good, and Gregory asked his congregation to consider the terror, confused embarrassment and dread with which people would be afflicted on that day (*Hev.* 12.4). When the deacon Peter asked why many things about souls which had previously been hidden had recently become clear, Gregory replied that, as the present world approaches its end, the future world comes close to touching it (*Dial.* 4.43.1f). And while no-one knew when the last hour would come, complacency was out of the question; the best plan was to prepare for the Judge by weeping and lamenting every day (*Hev.* 13.6). Gregory's sharp concern with the

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end of the world stands out against the mainstream of preceding post-biblical Christian thought, although it is paralleled by the earliest suras of the Qur'an, revealed just a few years later, and a sense of the imminence of the end also occurs in some Christian works of the later seventh century.

It would be fatally easy to gain, on the basis of a number of powerfully worded passages such as those we have been considering, an overwhelmingly negative picture of Gregory and his times. We must resist the temptation to do this. Gregory found it possible to put a positive spin on temporal losses: they were the means through which one could return to eternal joys, so the whole aim of the Bible could be seen as providing a hope of abiding joy which would strengthen us in the midst of passing hardships (*Mor*. 26.16.26). And, quite apart from consolations of this kind, in some ways the Rome of his day was a congenial place. The forum remained a centre. A person going there or to the baths could invite someone with time on their hands to keep them company (*Hev*. 6.6). A story known in England has Gregory, before becoming pope, joining a crowd of people looking for things to buy there,[12] and a few years after Gregory died the last monument known to have been erected in the forum, a statue in honour of the emperor Phocas, was placed atop an older column. Gregory was also tireless in finding ways to make life more tolerable. In the ninth century a big book could still be seen in the Lateran palace, the headquarters of the bishop of Rome, which showed the names, ages and professions of all those, in Rome and elsewhere, who received largesse from him.[13] When he heard of a priest from out of town who was able to work miracles, Gregory summoned him and placed him in a hospital: 'If he had the power of healing, it would quickly be proved there!' Before long the priest had laid his hands on a sick person, prayed over him and cured him (*Dial*. 3.35). We know of 3,000 nuns resident in Rome who received a large sum annually, but Gregory considered the money well spent, believing that it was because of their tears and abstinence that Rome had been able to hold out for many years against the swords of the Lombards (*Reg*. 7.23).

Gregory also proved remarkably energetic in other areas.[14] In some parts of Italy churches had been devastated by the coming of the Lombards; elsewhere there were clergy of appallingly low calibre. A letter to the bishop of Cagliari in Sardinia mentions a whole raft of issues: the archdeacon had defied the bishop's direction to cease living with women; peasants who were not Christians were living on estates owned by the church; clergy were falling into sins of the flesh, so that it was imperative that only men capable of continence were ordained;

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