

Ineffably Effable:

The Pinnacle of Mystical Ascent in Gregory of Nyssa's *De vita Moysis*¹

Abstract: In his commentary on the Song of Songs, Gregory of Nyssa describes a three-step progression of the soul to God, an ascent which ends in the darkness of God's ineffability. Though some of Gregory's most prominent interpreters understand Moses' ascent into the darkness to be the definitive encounter with God in *De vita Moysis* as well, it is here argued that in *De vita Moysis* Gregory of Nyssa makes the culminating moment, not the apophatic experience of the darkness, but the encounter with the celestial tabernacle, Christ. Gregory thereby suggests that the mystical ascent to God ends in the encounter of God as both unknowable and known, transcendent but also incarnate.

Introduction

In his commentary on the Song of Songs, Gregory of Nyssa appropriates Origen's three stages of spiritual ascent, a theory which was itself patterned after the Hellenistic curriculum of ethics, physics, and enoptics, as well as Solomon's trilogy of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs.² These three stages, traditionally called 'purgation, illumination, and unification,' are delineated in *Homily 11* when Gregory comments on Song of Songs 5:2. Purgation is the 'first departure from false and mistaken assumptions about God,' a 'change from darkness to light' frequently associated with Moses' encounter with the burning bush.³ In the second stage, illumination, the soul contemplates 'hidden things,' a process which is like a 'cloud

¹ I am grateful to Warren Smith, Sarah Decker, Hans Boersma, and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

² Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), p. 152; Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de saint Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris: Aubier, 1953), p. 19.

³ In *Canticum canticorum* Homily 15 in Hermannus Langerbeck, ed., *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* (hereafter GNO) (Leiden: Brill, 1952-) VI.322. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Translations of *De vita Moysis* are from Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses* (Classics of Western Spirituality; New York: Paulist Press, 1978; repr., New York: HarperOne, 2006) (hereafter *Vit Moys*).

overshadowing all that appears, guiding and accustoming the soul to see what is hidden.’⁴

According to Daniélou these ‘hidden realities’ concern ‘le mystère du salut, comme chez saint Paul l’οἰκονομία,’ that is, God’s plan of redemption as revealed in Scripture.⁵ Finally, purgation and illumination lead the soul to unification, when the soul leaves behind,

whatever is accessible to human nature and comes to the innermost sanctuary of the knowledge of God, being seized from every direction by the divine darkness in which all that appears and is comprehended is left outside. Only the invisible and incomprehensible where God is remain for the soul’s contemplation (τῇ θεωρίᾳ τῆς ψυχῆς), as the word says concerning the lawgiver, “Moses entered into the darkness where God was.”⁶

In the final stage, then, the soul moves beyond cognitive knowledge of God, for God’s simplicity cannot be grasped by discursive reasoning. Rather, as Smith puts it, ‘As the bride in the darkness of her wedding night, the soul does not see the unknowable God, but rather feels with its spiritual sense only his loving presence.’⁷

The themes of purgation, illumination, and unification are found throughout Nyssen’s spiritual and mystical writings. In *De vita Moysis*, however, Gregory offers a spiritual reading of Moses’ career in which the darkness of unification is followed by Moses’ entrance into the tabernacle not made with hands.⁸ It is possible, of course, that Gregory did not mean to suggest the tabernacle truly represents an encounter with God that is deeper and more intimate than the encounter with God’s infinity in the darkness. Indeed, some of the most prominent interpreters of Gregory understand Moses’ ascent into the darkness to be the definitive encounter with God in

⁴ In *Canticum canticorum*, pp. 322-323.

⁵ Daniélou, *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique*, p. 172.

⁶ In *Canticum canticorum* p.323.

⁷ Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, p. 153. Daniélou (*Platonisme et Théologie Mystique*, p. 185) comments, ‘Et c’est ici que l’originalité de Grégoire de Nysse apparaît le plus, et qu’on peut voir en lui le vrai fondateur de la théologie mystique. Sa grande idée, en effet, est que, même pour l’âme parvenue à la θεωρία – qu’il intègre – l’οὐσία divine reste encore infiniment inaccessible.’

⁸ In *Canticum Canticorum* is usually thought to have preceded *De vita Moysis*, but see the arguments of Franz Dünzl to the contrary: ‘Gregor von Nyssa’s *Homilien zum Canticum* auf dem Hintergrund seiner *Vita Moysis*’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 44 (1990), pp. 371-81, esp. pp. 372-7.

De vita Moysis. Yet, there are good reasons to suppose *De vita Moysis* presents a different picture of the mystical ascent to God than is found in the commentary on the Song of Songs. To be specific, I shall argue that in *De vita Moysis*, Gregory of Nyssa makes the culminating moment, not the apophatic experience of the darkness, but the encounter with the celestial tabernacle, Christ, thereby suggesting that the mystical ascent to God does not end in the darkness of God's ineffability, but in the encounter of God as both unknowable and known, utterly transcendent but also incarnate.

A True Ascent?

Before attempting to demonstrate that the tabernacle represents the pinnacle of spiritual ascent, it is necessary to ascertain whether *De vita Moysis* depicts a true ascent marked by identifiable stages, or, as Andrew Louth has argued, a series of moments – snapshots, as it were – that the soul experiences while approaching God. Louth suggests it is not clear that for Gregory,

these three ways are strictly successive, as in Origen. For example, the first way is said to be the way of purification, but also of illumination, which is also characteristic of the second way. There is, then, at least overlapping between the three ways. But it seems that the true state of affairs is rather that these three ways are not so much three stages as three moments in the soul's approach to God.⁹

Smith concedes that, for Gregory, purgation, illumination, and unification are not discrete stages, but goes on to critique Louth's construal, pointing out that it is insufficient to describe the three ways as 'moments' because there is a 'logical necessity for the purification of the passions before there is sufficient order in the soul to engage in the contemplative life and to be illuminated by the knowledge of God's benevolent economy.'¹⁰ Moreover, as Gregory argues in his spiritual interpretation of the burning bush, contemplation requires that we 'purify our opinions concerning nonbeing,' which means recognizing that 'none of those things which are apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by the understanding really subsist, but that the transcendent essence and cause of the universe, on which everything depends, alone

⁹ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 80.

¹⁰ Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, pp. 153-4.

subsists.’¹¹ Thus, contemplation requires that the soul be at least partially purified of the passions and of erroneous views of Being. This would seem to suggest that purgation and illumination, while overlapping, relate to each other in a clear logical progression.

To be sure, Gregory gives no indication that the soul must be completely purged of the passions and mistaken apprehensions of Being before receiving illumination. Rather, as Smith argues, ‘the soul advances in its understanding and enjoyment of God in proportion to its growth in moral likeness to God.’¹² Thus, purgation and illumination are ‘linked together in an ever-ascending spiral in which the soul advances toward and into God by moving through a dialectical cycle of purgation and illumination.’¹³ Smith’s image of an ever-ascending spiral aptly describes both the logical progression from purgation to illumination, and the fact that the soul is not purified once and for all before receiving illumination.

Smith does not say whether he finds a logical progression between illumination and unification similar to the progression from purgation to illumination, but there is good reason to believe that Louth’s description is inadequate here as well. In *De vita Moysis*, the trumpets beckon Moses up the mountain of the knowledge of God (τῷ τῆς θεογνωσίας ὄρει).¹⁴ The trumpets, according to Nyssen’s spiritual exegesis, are the preaching of the Law and the prophets concerning the divine nature and the Incarnation, as well as the proclamation of creation concerning its creator.¹⁵ In 2.169 Gregory gives a concise description of the movement from purgation to illumination (i.e., the contemplation of the preaching of the trumpets), and from this illumination to the darkness:

When he who has been purified and is sharp of hearing in his heart hears this sound – I am speaking of the knowledge of the divine power which comes from the contemplation of reality (τὴν ἐκ τῆς θεωρίας τῶν ὄντων γινομένην πρὸς τὴν τῆς θείας δυνάμεως γνῶσιν)

¹¹ *Vit Moys* 2.24.

¹² Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, p. 154.

¹³ Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, p. 153.

¹⁴ Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, p. 152. The Greek text of *De vita Moysis* is taken from Jean Danielou, *Grégoire de Nysse: La vie de Moïse ou Traité de la perfection en matière de vertu* (3rd ed.; Sources chrétiennes 1; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968).

¹⁵ *Vit Moys* 2.158-9; 2.168-9.

– he is led by it to the place where his intelligence lets him slip in where God is. This is called darkness by Scripture, which signifies, as I said, the unknown and unseen. When he arrives there, he sees that tabernacle not made with hands, which he shows to those below by means of a material likeness.

For Gregory, then, one does not come to the darkness by a diverse number of paths or sequences. Rather, it is the trumpets – the Old Testament read spiritually and the contemplation of the created order – that lead one to realize that God transcends all created things and cannot, therefore, be grasped by means of created analogies. Thus, while the spiritual ascent of actual human beings may rarely correspond exactly to a three-fold progression of purgation, illumination, and unification – indeed Gregory himself makes no attempt to describe three perfectly distinct stages – there is a clear and necessary logical progression at work.¹⁶ Just as the soul who is not purified cannot engage in contemplation, the soul enters into the darkness only because she is beckoned there by the contemplation of Scripture and created order. It would seem, then, that in Gregory’s appropriation of the three ways he retains a true progression of ascending stages.¹⁷

Is Darkness the last step?

In 2.169 of *De vita Moysis*, quoted above, when Gregory recapitulates the progression from purification to contemplation and then to the darkness, he does not stop with the darkness, but goes on to say, ‘When he arrives there [i.e. in the darkness], he sees that tabernacle not made with hands, which he shows to those below by means of a material likeness.’ Interestingly, there is no corresponding further step in the commentary on Song of Songs, where the ascent ends with the darkness. Does this change indicate a development in Gregory’s thought, or should *De*

¹⁶ Indeed, there seems to be progress within the stages themselves. See, e.g., *Vit Moys* 2.165 where Gregory speaks of Moses receiving additional instruction ‘through the word’ while he was in the darkness.

¹⁷ Ronald E. Heine (*Perfection in the Virtuous Life: A Study in the Relationship between Edification and Polemical Theology in Gregory of Nyssa’s De Vita Moysis* [Patristic Monograph Series; Philadelphia: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1975], p. 104) notes that *De Vita Moysis* is replete with ascent language.

vita Moysis be read according to the schema found in the commentary? In other words, does the movement from the darkness to the tabernacle represent another step in the ascent?

In keeping with his emphasis on the non-linear nature of the three ways, Louth does not consider the possibility that the revelation of the heavenly tabernacle could denote an experience lying on the other side of the entrance into darkness. Rather, the movement from the darkness to the tabernacle merely indicates that the three ways are not ‘strictly successive.’¹⁸ Indeed, in his discussion of the three ways as found in Gregory, Louth includes the tabernacle under the second way, despite the fact that Gregory places it after the entrance into darkness. When Louth goes on to describe the third way, he jumps back to Gregory’s description of the darkness in paragraphs 2.162-164, giving the impression that the tabernacle actually comes before the darkness in Gregory’s narrative. While Louth is no doubt correct that the three ways are not *strictly* successive, we must be wary of subordinating the flow of thought in *De vita Moysis* to a schema derived from *In Canticum canticorum*.

Louth is not alone in treating the tabernacle as if it came before the entrance into darkness, rather than after. Daniélou divides his influential study, *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique*, into three sections corresponding to the three ways, and the discussion of the tabernacle is included only under the second way. The fact that Moses arrives at the tabernacle after entering the darkness appears to have no significance for Daniélou’s construal. Indeed, for Daniélou, the tabernacle represents all objects of contemplation, and may therefore be relegated wholly to the second way:

La θεωρία a donc pour lui deux objets: d’une part, le monde angélique, qui est figuré par le tabernacle d’en-haut, et qui correspond au monde intelligible; de l’autre, le monde ecclésiastique, qui est figuré par le tabernacle d’en-bas... La θεωρία est donc en définitive pour Grégoire la contemplation du mystère dans sa substance intemporelle.¹⁹

I critique Daniélou’s equation of the heavenly tabernacle with ‘the angelic world’ below. For now it must suffice to note that Daniélou understands Nyssen to be following Philo in equating the heavenly and earthly tabernacles with the intelligible and sensible worlds such that the revelation of the heavenly tabernacle represents, not a further revelation of God himself, but a

¹⁸ Louth, *Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, p. 84.

¹⁹ Daniélou, *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique*, p. 172.

reversion from experiencing God's ineffability in the darkness to contemplating the intelligible world.

Similarly, Moses' ascent into the tabernacle plays no role whatsoever in Martin Laird's reading of *De vita Moysis*. Surprisingly, for Laird the culminating moment is found neither in the darkness nor in the tabernacle (which is never mentioned), but in the soul's faith which allows her to move beyond the paradox of seeing and not seeing in the darkness. Despite the fact that Gregory does not mention faith in 2.164, Laird argues that the true meaning of this passage is unlocked much later, in 2.315:

The apophatic ascent at ii. 164 is completed really at ii. 315. The mind enters the darkness where God is and sees in not seeing, but by means of faith one nevertheless draws near God. It would seem then that Gregory establishes a certain parallel between this seeing that consists in not seeing and faith. The paradoxical expression presents a block to reason, but faith can move beyond this obstacle and approach God. Faith, it would seem, resolves this coincidence of opposites.²⁰

While Laird is surely correct to incorporate 2.315 into his interpretation of 2.164, his reading of Moses' ascent into darkness shows a regrettable lack of attention to detail. Let us turn, therefore, to the passage in question.

We have already seen that there is a logical progression in the ascent of *De vita Moysis*. In 2.167, after achieving unification in the inner sanctuary of the darkness, Gregory describes the movement from the darkness to the tabernacle as an ascent to an even higher and greater place of revelation: 'After this [i.e., after entering the darkness] he comes to the tabernacle not made with hands. Who will follow someone who makes his way through such places and elevates his mind to such heights, who, as though he were passing from one peak to another, comes ever higher than he was through his ascent to the heights [διὰ τῆς τῶν ὑψηλῶν ἀναβάσεως ἀεὶ ἑαυτοῦ γίνεται ὑψηλότερος]?' Unlike the description of the soul's ascent in the commentary on Song of Songs, here Gregory depicts the eternal (ἀεὶ) ascent of the soul leading out of the darkness and into the tabernacle.

²⁰ Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 85.

In the remainder of 2.167 Gregory goes on to recapitulate the entire ascent, beginning with the first steps at the base of the mountain, making it clear that the tabernacle not made with hands was the telos of the journey all along:

First, he leaves behind the base of the mountain and is separated from all those too weak for the ascent. Then, as he rises higher in his ascent he hears the sounds of the trumpets. Thereupon, he slips into the invisible sanctuary of divine knowledge. And he does not remain there [Καὶ οὐδὲ ἐν τούτῳ μένει], but he passes on to the tabernacle not made with hands. For truly this is the limit [τὸ πέρας] that someone reaches who is elevated through such ascents.

This passage is relevant to the question at hand for a number of reasons: Nyssen pellucidly indicates a series of distinct stages, beginning ‘first’ (πρῶτον) with the separation from those too weak for the ascent, ‘then’ (εἴτα) hearing the sounds of the trumpets, ‘thereupon’ (ἐπὶ τούτοις) entering into the darkness. Also, Nyssen indicates that the soul does not remain in the darkness (Καὶ οὐδὲ ἐν τούτῳ μένει), but presses on to the tabernacle.

Furthermore, Nyssen leaves no doubt whether entrance into the tabernacle truly represents a higher stage than the darkness. Indeed, it cannot be maintained that the tabernacle comes after the darkness merely because Nyssen followed the sequence of events in Exodus, nor is Louth correct to claim that this merely indicates that the stages are not ‘strictly successive.’²¹ Rather, Nyssen makes it clear that the tabernacle denotes a more advanced stage. After having referred to the movement from the darkness to the tabernacle as ‘passing from one peak to another, com[ing] ever higher than he was through his ascent to the heights,’ Nyssen writes, ‘And he does not remain in this place [i.e., in the darkness], but he passes on to the tabernacle not made with hands. For truly this is the limit [τὸ πέρας] that someone reaches who is elevated through such ascents.’ The ascent up the mountain has always been a journey toward the tabernacle not made with hands, the final destination of those who have entered the darkness.

Moreover, the fact that Gregory describes the tabernacle as the limit or destination (τὸ πέρας) of those who ascend the mountain suggests that the tabernacle represents the limitless good which draws the soul into ever greater desire. In *De vita Moysis*, τὸ πέρας is used most often to refer to the limitlessness of God and, correspondingly, the limitlessness of the journey

²¹ Louth, *Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, p. 84.

toward perfection. In 1.7-8, for example, Gregory points out that since the good has no limit, the desire of the one who participates in the good must have no stopping place: ‘It is therefore undoubtedly impossible to attain perfection, since, as I have said, perfection is not marked off by limits: The one limit of virtue is the absence of a limit. How then would one arrive at the sought-for boundary [τὸ ζητούμενον... πέρας] when he can find no boundary [τὸ πέρας]?’ Gregory’s doctrine of eternal progress (ἐπέκτασις) is based on the lack of any πέρας in the good: ‘This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more. Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the Good can be found [διὰ τὸ μήτε τοῦ καλοῦ τι πέρας εὑρίσκεσθαι].’²² To be sure, in these passages Gregory is emphasizing the lack of any πέρας in God. Thus, it is possible that Gregory simply contradicts himself when he identifies a limit in the soul’s ascent in 2.167. Yet, it seems unlikely that Gregory would have blatantly contradicted his theory of eternal progress in this way. A more charitable interpretation would be to read Gregory’s claim that the tabernacle is ‘the limit that someone reaches who is elevated through such ascents’ to mean that the soul will never stop contemplating the tabernacle, that is, that the tabernacle represents the limitless limit which the soul desires ever more.

To sum up: we have seen that the stages of spiritual progress represent a true ascent – an ‘ever-ascending spiral’ to use Smith’s phrase – even if these stages overlap. Moreover, contrary to Louth and others, in *De vita Moysis* Gregory describes the tabernacle not made with hands as a more advanced stage of spiritual ascent than the darkness. Indeed, the tabernacle is the very limit or destination of the ascent.

All of this raises a number of pressing questions: how could the lush liturgical accoutrements of the tabernacle represent a more definitive revelation than the apophatic experience of darkness? Did Nyssen unintentionally describe an ascent that ends with an

²² *Vit Moys* 2.236-239. On eternal progress in Gregory see Everett Ferguson, ‘God’s Infinity and Man’s Mutability’, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 18 (1973), pp. 59-78; Ferguson, ‘Progress in Perfection: Gregory of Nyssa’s *Vita moysis*’, *Studia Patristica* 14 (1976), pp. 307-14; Albert-Kees Geljon, ‘Divine Infinity in Gregory of Nyssa and Philo of Alexandria’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 59 (2005), pp. 152-177; Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), esp. pp. 231-46.

idolatrous absolutizing of the intelligible world? If the ascent ends with anything other than an encounter with the infinitude and transcendence of God, how can the soul grow perpetually in its desire for the Good? To answer these questions we must ascertain what the tabernacle not made with hands represents for Nyssa.

What is the Tabernacle?

In 2.169-170 Gregory turns his attention to the goal of the ascent:

When he arrives there [i.e., in the darkness], he sees that tabernacle not made with hands, which he shows to those below by means of a material likeness. What, then, is that tabernacle not made with hands which was shown to Moses on the mountain and to which he was commanded to look as to an archetype, so that he might reproduce in a handmade structure that marvel not made with hands? (For the Scripture says, “See that you make them according to the pattern shown you on the mountain).” There were gold pillars supported by silver bases and decorated with similar silver capitals; then there were other pillars whose capitals and bases were of bronze but whose shafts were of silver...[etc.]’

Gregory continues describing the ornate details of the tabernacle until the end of 2.172. But is this a description of the heavenly tabernacle or of the handmade structure which was modeled after the heavenly archetype? Gregory does not indicate in 2.170 whether he is describing the archetype or the handmade structure which is described in Exodus 25-26, but at the conclusion of his lengthy description he asks ‘Of what things not made with hands are these an imitation? (Ποίων ἀχειροποιήτων ἐστὶ ταῦτα μιμήματα;) And of what benefit does the material imitation of those things Moses saw there convey to those who look at it?’²³ In other words, ‘those things’ are merely the imitation of the heavenly archetype, the material imitation of what Moses saw. The description in 2.170-172, therefore, is not a description of the heavenly tabernacle, but a description of the earthly tabernacle.²⁴

A brief outline of 2.170-174 may illuminate the point:

- A. What is the tabernacle not made with hands? (2.170.1)
 - 1. God commanded Moses to reproduce the archetype in a handmade structure (2.170.2-6).

²³ *Vit Moys* 2.173

²⁴ *Pace Smith, Passion and Paradise*, p. 172.

- i. Description of the handmade structure (2.170.6-172)
- B. Return to the question at hand: of what things not made with hands is the earthly tabernacle an imitation? (2.173.1-3)
 - 1. Disclaimer: the following interpretation is conjectural (2.173.3-11).
- C. The identity of the heavenly tabernacle revealed by taking a hint from Paul (2.174).

At the beginning of 2.170 Gregory turns to the question of the identity of the heavenly tabernacle, but he does not answer the question directly. Instead, he begins by describing the earthly tabernacle following the details given in Exodus. Then, before he attempts to describe the archetype of the earthly tabernacle, he warns his readers that the following interpretation is a conjecture. It is only in 2.174 that he identifies the heavenly tabernacle.

Thus having reminded the reader of the features of the earthly tabernacle, Gregory finally goes on to describe the archetype:

Taking a hint from what has been said by Paul, who partially uncovered the mystery of these things, we say that Moses was earlier instructed by a type in the mystery of the tabernacle which encompasses all things [τὸ περὶ τῆς σκηνῆς τῆς τὸ πᾶν περιεχούσης μυστήριον]. This tabernacle would be “Christ, who is the power and the wisdom of God” [1 Cor 1:24], who in his own nature was not made with hands, yet he received that which had been built [δέχεται τὸ κατασκευασθῆναι] when it became necessary for this tabernacle to be erected among us. Thus, the same tabernacle is in a way both unfashioned and fashioned, uncreated in preexistence but created in having received this material composition.²⁵

The tabernacle not made with hands is not a finite or localized shelter, but that which shelters the universe. All things are encompassed by it, and the earthly tabernacle is but an imitation of its uncreated glory. The heavenly tabernacle, therefore, cannot be any created thing, but only the one for whom and through whom all things were created, and in whom all things hold together (Col 1:16-17), namely, Christ. Moses does not ascend beyond the tabernacle. Rather, as Hans Boersma recently put it, ‘since the tabernacle itself is infinite, Moses can progress infinitely within the tabernacle.’²⁶

²⁵ *Vit Moys* 2.174 slightly altered. Malherbe and Ferguson translate δέχεται τὸ κατασκευασθῆναι as ‘capable of being made.’

²⁶ Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, p. 244.

This interpretation of the tabernacle not made with hands is doubly fitting because Christ is not only the one who ‘encompasses everything in himself (ὁ ἐν αὐτῷ μὲν περιέχων τὸ πᾶν)’ but who also ‘pitched his own tabernacle among us (πηξάμενος δὲ καὶ ἐν ἡμῖν τὴν ἰδίαν σκηνήν).’²⁷ In other words, the archetype shown to Moses and the earthly imitation of the archetype correspond to the divine and human natures of Christ, the Logos who became flesh and ‘tabernacled’ (ἐσκήνωσεν) among us (John 1:14). Indeed, although Gregory prefaces his interpretation in 2.173 with the caveat that it is conjectural, he seems to gain confidence in 2.175 when he declares,

What we say is of course not obscure to those who have accurately received the mystery of our faith. For there is one thing out of all others which both existed before the ages and came into being at the end of the ages. It did not need a temporal beginning (for how could what was before all times and ages be in need of a temporal origin?), but for our sakes, who had lost our existence through our thoughtlessness, it consented to be born like us so that it might bring that which had left reality back again to reality.

For Gregory the fittingness of this spiritual reading of Exodus is clear; the ‘common shelter (σκέπη) of all, who encompasses everything within himself’ but who pitched his tent among us, is rightly – and doubly – called ‘tabernacle’.²⁸

At first glance it is not clear why Gregory thinks this interpretation is from Paul. The author of Hebrews, whom Gregory took to be Paul, describes the heavenly tabernacle mentioned in Exodus as ‘the tabernacle not made with hands’ (9:11), but this does not explain why Gregory thought Paul taught that the tabernacle is Christ. It appears that the Pauline origin of Gregory’s interpretation lies in an unstated assumption about 1 Cor 1:24. For Gregory, when Paul says Christ is ‘the power and wisdom of God,’ he means that Christ is the divine Wisdom or Logos spoken of in passages such as Prov 8. This interpretation of 1 Cor 1:24 is found elsewhere in Gregory’s writings and it is well-attested in late antiquity.²⁹

²⁷ *Vit Moys* 2.175.

²⁸ *Vit Moys* 2.177. Malherbe and Ferguson translate σκέπη as ‘protector,’ a translation which find no support in Liddell and Scott. Cf., Daniélou ‘l’enveloppe commune du tout.’

²⁹ E.g., *Contra Eunomium* 1.1 (GNO II.335.20-25). Cf. Athanasius, *De decretis* 15.2 in H.G. Opitz, ed., *Athanasius Werke* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1940) II.1 p.13; Augustine, *De Trinitate* 15.3.5

An important feature of Logos or Sophia theology was the belief that all things were created through divine Wisdom. In Wisdom of Solomon 9:1-2, for example, the figure of Sophia or Logos is depicted as the agent of creation: ‘O God of my ancestors and Lord of mercy, who have made all things by your Word (ἐν λόγῳ σου), and by your wisdom (τῇ σοφίᾳ σου) have formed humankind to have dominion over the creatures you have made’ (NRSV alt.).³⁰ Interestingly, in his discussion of the heavenly tabernacle Gregory repeatedly cites John 1 and Colossians 1-2 – passages that describe Christ using traditional Wisdom imagery — in order to emphasize that Christ is the Only-begotten God who makes the Father known (2.163, 175, 179),³¹ who is before all things (2.175 cf., Col 1:17), in whom the fullness of divinity resides (2.177 cf., Col 2:9), and in whom all things were created (2.179 cf., Col 1:16).³² It would seem, therefore, that Nyssen adduces 1 Cor 1:24 as evidence that Christ is the tabernacle not made with hands because he understands Paul to be saying that Christ is the one through whom all things were created and in whom all things hold together. The Wisdom of God is rightly called tabernacle because, as Gregory puts it in his *Oratio catechetica*, ‘The universe is good, and all things in it are seen to have been made wisely and skillfully. All things, therefore, are the works of the Logos who lives and subsists.’³³

The interpretation presented here is sharply at odds with that of Daniélou, for whom the heavenly tabernacle is not Christ but the angelic world, the ‘plérôme des créatures spirituelles entourant le Logos.’³⁴ Daniélou points out that Philo had already appropriated the Platonic division of the intelligible and sensible worlds by changing the intelligible world from ‘le monde

in Stephen McKenna, trans., *Augustine: On the Trinity. Books 8-15* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) p. 202.

³⁰ See also Prov 3:19; 8:27.

³¹ One may object that the use of the title Μονογενὴς Θεός does not constitute an allusion to John 1. Given the glut of references to John 1 and the closely analogous Col 1, however, it is unlikely that Nyssen employed the title without regard for its context.

³² John 1 is cited or alluded to in 2.163, 174, 179. Colossians 1-2 is cited or alluded to in 2.175, 177, 179.

³³ *Oratio catechetica* 1.61-63 (GNO III/4.29-30).

³⁴ Daniélou, *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique*, p. 172-3.

des idées impersonnelles, des archétypes' to the realm of the angels, and argues that Gregory accepted Philo's Hebraized version of the sensible world more or less unchanged. In 2.179 Gregory writes,

We can gain clarity about the figures pertaining to the tabernacle from the very words of the Apostle. For he says somewhere [Col 1] with reference to the Only Begotten, whom we have perceived in place of the tabernacle, that in him were created all things, everything visible and everything invisible, thrones, dominations, sovereignties, powers, or forces.

According to Daniélou, Gregory is saying Christ is 'chef de toutes les créatures spirituelles.'³⁵ Moreover, rather than saying that Christ is the one in whom all things were created and hold together, 'Le Tout ici, c'est comme toujours pour Grégoire, non l'univers visible, mais le plérôme des Anges.'³⁶

Daniélou does not provide support for his claim that, for Gregory, 'all things' always refers to the pleroma of the angels, and there is good reason to believe that Gregory is actually further emphasizing Christ's role as tabernacle of all things in this passage: 1) first and most obviously, Gregory explicitly says in this passage that the tabernacle is Christ (τοῦ Μονογενοῦς, ὃν ἀντὶ τῆς σκηνῆς νενοήκαμεν). 2) We have seen in *De vita Moysis* the importance of biblical Wisdom/Logos Christology and its emphasis on Wisdom as the power through which all things were created and hold together. The passage cited by Daniélou, Colossians 1, emphasizes this very thing; just as there are various liturgical accoutrements including images of angels in the earthly tabernacle, all spiritual powers were created by Christ, are held together in him, and are therefore subordinate to him. In Daniélou's reading the ornaments of the tabernacle (i.e., the angels) are mistaken for the tabernacle itself (i.e., Christ). 3) Against those who would suggest there are invisible forces not under the sovereignty of Christ, Col 1:16 emphasizes that not just everything visible, but also everything invisible was created by Christ ('in him were created all things, everything visible *and everything invisible*, thrones, dominations, sovereignties, powers, or forces'). Oddly, Daniélou argues that for Gregory 'all things' refers only to the invisible or intelligible realm, but – aside from the obvious fact that 'all things' is as inclusive a phrase as

³⁵ Daniélou, *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique*, p. 173.

³⁶ Daniélou, *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique*, p. 173.

one can imagine – Gregory gives no indication that the subsistence of all invisible things in Christ excludes all visible things. On the contrary, the Wisdom of God is perceived in visible creation precisely because it was created by Wisdom (cf. 2.168-169).

Having seen that Gregory reads the heavenly tabernacle as Christ's divine nature in which all things are sheltered and the tabernacle below as the human nature in which he dwelt among us, it is possible to see a number of hints earlier in the text that Gregory was working toward this interpretation all along. First, while describing Moses' entrance into the darkness, Nyssen quotes the prologue of the Gospel of John:

This is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says, "No one has ever seen God" [John 1:18] thus asserting that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men, but also by every intelligent creature (νοητῇ φύσει).³⁷

The most obvious reason Nyssen cites John 1 is to show that God is ineffable to humans but also to beings that are intelligible by nature (νοητῇ φύσει). To be sure, it is possible that he is using John 1:18 without regard for its context. Yet, it is striking that – like Moses' ascent from the darkness to the tabernacle not made with hands – John 1:18 moves from a declaration of the ineffability of God to an identification of him who is both unknown and known, that is, Christ who is ineffable and all-encompassing in his divinity but who tabernacles among us and makes the Father known: 'No one has seen God. The only-begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father has made him known.'

This suggestion finds further support when Gregory cites this same verse while identifying Christ as the tabernacle twelve paragraphs later: 'This one is the Only Begotten God, who encompasses everything in himself, but who also pitched his own tabernacle among us.'³⁸ It may be, then, that the logic of John 1:18 – and of John 1 as a whole – is pivotal for Gregory's understanding of the mystical ascent. John 1 starts in the darkness, as it were, with the eternal communion of God and the divine Logos who created all things and who, therefore, utterly transcend all created things. The prologue climaxes in verse 14: 'And the Logos became flesh

³⁷ *Vit Moys* 2.163

³⁸ *Vit Moys* 2.175

and pitched his tent among us.’ The movement of the entire prologue (i.e., from the darkness of God’s ineffability to the light of the incarnation) is recapitulated in verse 18. Thus, when Gregory cites the beginning of 1:18 while discussing the darkness and the end of verse 18 to identify the tabernacle who is Christ, we see that the ascent from the darkness to the tabernacle is a true ascent, rising from an awareness of God’s transcendence to an encounter with God who, as tabernacle, is no less transcendent but who nonetheless pitches his tent among us. In light of his reliance on John 1, it is not surprising that Gregory names the tabernacle the limit or destination of the ascent.

A subtler hint that the ascent up the mountain climaxes in the tabernacle can be found in Gregory’s description of the trumpets which beckon Moses up the mountain. Most people scarcely reach the base of the mountain of the knowledge of God, but ‘If one were a Moses, he would ascend higher and hear the sound of trumpets which, as the text of the history says, becomes louder as one advances. For the preaching of the divine nature (τὸ περὶ τῆς θείας φύσεως κήρυγμα) is truly a trumpet blast.’³⁹ It is not surprising that Gregory says the trumpets proclaim the divine nature in his description of the mountain of ἡ θεολογία, more interesting for our purposes, however, is what he says in the next sentence: ‘The Law and the Prophets trumpeted the divine mystery of the incarnation (τὸ θεῖον τῆς κατὰ ἄνθρωπον οἰκονομίας μυστήριον), but the first sounds were too weak to strike the disobedient ear... The last sounds, which came through the gospel preaching, struck their ears...’⁴⁰ The trumpets proclaimed both the divine nature and the incarnation. This seems to indicate, first of all, that the goal of the trek up the mountain has something to do with the incarnation, and not simply with an encounter with God’s ineffability. Secondly, this pairing of the preaching of the divine nature with the preaching

³⁹ *Vit Moys* 2.158. Gregory takes the trumpets to be the Law and the Prophets as well as the signs of God in the created order, adding the latter interpretation in 2.168-9.

⁴⁰ *Vit Moys* 2.159. alt. Malherbe and Ferguson translate τὸ θεῖον τῆς κατὰ ἄνθρωπον οἰκονομίας μυστήριον (literally: ‘the divine mystery of the economy according to man’) as ‘the divine mystery of the incarnation.’ Cf., also Daniélou: ‘le mystère de l’Incarnation.’ A TLG search of οἰκονομία κατὰ ἄνθρωπον in Nyssen’s corpus suggests that these translators were correct to interpret the phrase as a circumlocution referring to the incarnation. E.g. *Antirrheticus adversus Apollinarium*, 3.134-35 (GNO III/I.183.4-16).

of the incarnation anticipates the union of the two in the tabernacle – that which is uncreated and transcendent but which took on a created existence in the incarnation.

Gregory's discussion of natural theology in 2.168-169 provides a third hint that the heavenly tabernacle is the apex of the ascent. After describing the darkness in 2.162-167, Gregory moves on to discuss the heavenly tabernacle: 'Thereupon, he slips into the inner sanctuary of divine knowledge. And he does not remain there but he passes on to the tabernacle not made with hands. For truly this is the limit that someone reaches who is elevated through such ascents.'⁴¹ Rather than going on to expatiate on the heavenly tabernacle, however, Nyssen unexpectedly doubles back to give another interpretation of the trumpets. In the sentence immediately following the one just quoted he writes,

For it seems to me that in another sense the heavenly trumpet becomes a teacher to the one ascending as he makes his way to what is not made with hands. For the construction of the wonders of heaven proclaims the Wisdom which shines forth in the things that are (τοῖς οὐσι) and sets forth the great glory of God through the things which are seen (διὰ τῶν φανομένων), in keeping with the statement, "the heavens declare the glory of God" [Ps 19:1]. It becomes the loud-sounding trumpet of clear and melodious teaching, as one of the Prophets says, "The heavens trumpeted from above" [Sir 46:17]. When he who has been purified and is sharp of hearing in his heart hears this sound (I am speaking of the knowledge of the divine power which comes from the contemplation of the things that are), he is led by it to the place where his intelligence lets him slip in where God is. This is called darkness by Scripture, which signifies, as I said, the unknown and unseen. After he arrives there, he sees that tabernacle not made with hands, which he shows to those below by means of a material likeness.⁴²

The fact that Nyssen interrupts his transition to the tabernacle to provide another interpretation of the trumpets suggests that the contemplation of the created order is important for understanding what follows. It is not only the Law and the Prophets which lead one up the mountain, but also the contemplation of the beauty of the created order. The wonders of creation lead one to the realization that it must have been created, and that the creator must be greater than the creation.

⁴¹ *Vit Moys* 2.167

⁴² *Vit Moys* 2.168.

To be more specific, this ‘knowledge of divine power which comes from the contemplation of the things that are’ leads one to the darkness by means of a *via causalitatis* and a *via negativa* as one realizes that God is the cause of creation and that he must be wholly other. The God who is the source of all being cannot be grasped by created analogies.

More importantly, contemplation of creation leads not only to the darkness but also to the tabernacle, for one discerns ‘the Wisdom which shines forth in creation.’ In other words, the *wisdom* of creation – the beauty of its construction – leads one by means of a *via eminentiae* to the *Wisdom* of God through whom all things were created. The wisdom and glory of God in creation prepare one for the encounter with Christ, ‘who is the power and Wisdom of God’, the tabernacle of all things.

Note, however, one cannot hear the trumpet blasts of the created order unless one has been purified of irrational passions. Earlier, in 2.157, Gregory stated that ‘The contemplation of God is not effected by the things which are seen (τὸ φαινόμενον) or heard.’⁴³ At first blush this would appear to be a blatant contradiction of what Gregory says in 2.168, ‘For the construction of the wonders of heaven proclaims the Wisdom which shines forth in the things that are and sets forth the great glory of God through the things which are seen (διὰ τῶν φαινομένων).’ Indeed, 2.168-169 fits so awkwardly in its context that one cannot rule out the possibility that Nyssen unintentionally trapped himself between contradictory convictions, namely, the Jewish and Christian belief that creation proclaims God’s glory, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the Platonic idea that contemplation of the intelligible realm must exclude the senses.

A more generous reading emerges if we presume that in 2.157 Gregory does not mean to exclude the senses per se from the contemplation of God. It is clear in 2.168-169 that the contemplation of creation leads one to the creator, and in 2.157 Gregory excludes – not simply the senses – but the customary preconceptions of irrational passions:

The contemplation of God is not effected by the things which are seen (τὸ φαινόμενον) or heard, nor is it comprehended by any of the customary perceptions of the mind. For “no eye has seen, and no ear has heard,” nor does it belong to those things which usually enter “into the heart of man” [1 Cor 2:9; Isa 64:4]. He who would approach the knowledge of things sublime must first purify his manner of life from all sensual and

⁴³ *Vit Moys* 2.157 alt.

irrational motion. He must wash from his understanding every opinion derived from some preconception and withdraw himself from his customary intercourse with this own companion, that is, with sense perceptions...When he is so purified, then he assaults the mountain.⁴⁴

Sense perceptions are not conducive to the contemplation of God until they have been purified of irrational passions or change. Indeed, Gregory uses the language of purification again in 2.169 to describe the person who is able to perceive divine power in the things that are.⁴⁵ The created order is able to lead one to the Wisdom of God who contains all things, but one who is beset by irrational passions is unable to perceive the glory and power of God in created things.

Conclusion

We have seen that in *De vita Moysis* the heavenly tabernacle is the limit or destination of the ascent up the mountain, and that Gregory understands the heavenly tabernacle to be Christ. This raises the question of the implications of *De vita Moysis* for understanding Gregory's doctrine of eternal progress. In the commentary on Song of Songs, unification ends in the darkness where the soul is compelled to progress ever further in the enjoyment of God in God's simplicity. In what ways does Nyssen's eschatology change in *De vita Moysis*?

First of all, *De vita Moysis* makes it clear in a number of passages that the perfection of human nature is an endless ascent into the infinite goodness of God.⁴⁶ It hardly needs to be stated, therefore, that Gregory does not repudiate eternal progress in *De vita Moysis*. Whatever

⁴⁴ *Vit Moys* 2.157 alt. In what can only be a most unfortunate transcriptional error, Malherbe and Ferguson render αἰσθητικῆς τε καὶ ἀλόγου κινήσεως as 'sensual and irrational *emotion*' (emphasis added). Presumably, κινήσεως was originally and appropriately translated as 'motion' but at some point before the translation was printed an 'e' was added. A similar error occurs in 2.176 where Malherbe and Ferguson render Εἰ δὲ σκηνὴ τὸ τοσοῦτον ἀγαθὸν ὀνομάζεται as 'But if we name such a *God* 'tabernacle''. Presumably, τὸ τοσοῦτον ἀγαθὸν was translated as 'such a good' but was subsequently changed to 'such a God.'

⁴⁵ 'When he who has been purified (Ὁ κεκαθαρμένος) and is sharp of hearing hears this sound (I am speaking of the knowledge of the divine power which comes from the contemplation of the things that are)...

⁴⁶ E.g., *Vit Moys* 1.5-9, 2.231.

he intends to say by emphasizing that which lies on the other side of the darkness, it is not to say that the soul simply becomes sated through a non-apophatic experience. By identifying the heavenly tabernacle with Christ's divinity, Gregory is able to stress that 'he who thinks God is something to be known does not have life' no less than if he had made the darkness the apex of the ascent. Indeed, the realization of God's simplicity in the darkness contributes to an encounter with Christ who created all things and who, therefore, is wholly other.

Then what exactly is different in *De vita Moysis*? The encounter with God's ineffability is surpassed by the encounter with the God-man Christ, who is both the unknown tabernacle of all in his infinity, but also one who is known intimately in his humanity and through the Church.⁴⁷ The soul who is purified and learns of the divine nature and the incarnation through Scripture and the created order eventually enters the darkness, and, having been purified of idolatrous ideas of God, the soul is drawn into the 'ever-ascending dialectic' – to use Smith's phrase – between God in his simplicity and God as known in Jesus of Nazareth.

⁴⁷ Cf., *Vit Moys* 2.189 where Gregory reads the earthly tabernacle as the Church.