



**Moses and the gnosiology of God, according Gregory's of Nyssa
interpretation in *Canticum Canticorum***
**Moisés y la gnoseología de Dios, según la interpretación de Gregorio de
Nisa en *Canticum Canticorum***
**Moisés e a gnoseologia de Deus de acordo com o *Canticum*
Canticorum de Gregório de Nissa**

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Resumo: Este trabalho pretende oferecer uma exposição sobre a obra de Gregório de Nissa em como Moisés poderia “saber” e “ver” a Deus. A humanidade e Deus estão em dois planos muito diferentes da existência. Moisés “conheceu” a Deus, porque ele tratou de sair com o orden de Deus. Cada vez que Moisés fez um movimento que incluía uma espécie de seu sacrifício, Deus se apareceu. Deus apresentou a Moisés através da zarza ardente. Gregory sublinhou que cada pessoa, incluindo Moisés, pode conhecer a essência de Deus – não se pode saber o que Deus é. Sem embargo, uno pode saber “que Deus está” – lo que significa que podemos saber que Deus existe. Moisés tenía muchas “visiones” de Dios y Gregory explicó que no es posible para cualquier hombre para describir la revelación de estos Dios a Moisés, ya que “Los seres humanos no son capaces de este conocimiento porque es” distinta “o” más allá de “ellos”. Moisés quería ver a Dios todo el tiempo. Gregory recordó a su audiencia que refleja el deseo erótico deseo espiritual sólo en parte; deseo espiritual -y en última instancia, la naturaleza divina -cannot limitarse al deseo erótico. Así, Gregorio de Nisa destacó tanto la inminencia de Dios cuánto su trascendencia. Moisés quería ver la misma cara de Dios. Su deseo se expresó a Dios. Él sabía que la salvación se logra a través del conocimiento de Dios, pero en la dimensión cristiana. Este conocimiento determina los seres humanos y la forma y el contenido de su vida. El conocimiento de Dios no es el trabajo del

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hombre ya en la enseñanza cristiana. Es la obra de fe a la verdad revelada. Por esta gran conquista feat- tiene como asistente sólo la fe del hombre con Dios y la gracia de Dios al hombre.

Abstract: This paper seeks to provide an exposition on Gregory of Nyssa's work on how Moses could "know" and "see" God. Humanity and God stand on two very different planes of existence. Moses "knew" God, because he tried to leave with God's order. Every time that Moses made a movement that included a kind of his sacrifice, God appeared to him. God presented Himself to Moses through the burning bush. Gregory underlined that that every person, included Moses, can know the essence of God – one cannot know what God is. However, one can know "that God is" – meaning that we can know that God exists. Moses had many "visions" of God and Gregory explained that it is not possible for any man to describe these God's revelation to Moses, because "Humans are not capable of this knowledge because it is "other than" or "beyond" them". Moses wanted to see God all the time. Gregory reminded his audience that erotic desire mirrors spiritual desire only in part; spiritual desire – and ultimately the divine nature – cannot be limited to erotic desire. Thus, Gregory of Nyssa highlighted both God's imminence and God's transcendence. Moses wanted to see the same face of God. His desire was expressed to God. He knew that Salvation is achieved through knowledge about God, but in Christian dimension. This knowledge determined both humans and the form and content of their life. The knowledge for God is no longer man's work in Christian teaching. It is the work of faith to the revealed truth. For this high feat-conquest has as assistant only the faith of man to God and the grace of God to man.

Keywords: Gnosiology – *Gnofos* – Moses – Ignorance – Agnoia – Knowledge – Gregory of Nyssa – *Canticum Canticorum*.

Palabras-chave: Gnoseología – *Gnofos* – Moisés – Ignorancia – Agnoia – Conocimiento – Gregorio de Nisa – *Canticum Canticorum*.

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I. Gnosiology: a general approach

The gnosiology – the study of knowledge is not a subject that only scholars deal with. The term is derived from the Ancient Greek words gnosis "knowledge" and logos "word", "discourse". The Orthodox gnosiology is an attempt of every Christian to live according the teaching of Christ and his disciples. Apostle Paul underlines: "pray also that the eyes of your heart may



be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints”.²

The scholar of Christian theology tries to find which the real gnosiology of God is. He based on the Bible, on patristic texts and the canons of Ecumenical and Local Councils. In the ancient gnosiology, there is an important question. If the names of things (including God’s) are conceived of as an image of the transcendent universalia (realism, archetype). Nominalism accepts that the universalia are simple names and not beings as in realism³. In the dialogue of Plato “Cratylus”, there are two opinions about the names of beings. One supports Cratylus’ view: “everything has a right name of its own, which comes by nature, and that a name is not whatever people call a thing by agreement, just a piece of their own voice applied to the thing, but that there is a kind of inherent correctness in names, which is the same for all men, both Greeks and barbarians”⁴. The other sustains Hermogenes’ idea that any name “is any correctness of names other than convention and agreement”⁵.

As far as the gnosiology in the East Othodoxy is delineated by the object to be known which is twofold: the Uncreated and the created. Only the Holy Trinity is Uncreated. The universe is created. Faith is knowledge of the Uncreated, and science is knowledge of the created. Man was created to know God; not only to believe in Him and to hope in Him, but to know Him and so to love Him and to serve Him. Knowledge of God is the aim and goal of man’s life, the purpose of his creation by God.⁶

In Orthodox theology, the gnosiology is symbolic. A distinction is made between the “essence” and “energies” of God. We can obtain knowledge of the divine uncreated energies, and not of the divine essence. God is unintelligible. The unintelligibility of God must be accepted by any human

² Eph. 1:18.

³ G. Metallinos, “Faith and Science in Orthodox Gnosiology and Methodology”, *Internet*, <http://www.romanity.org/mir/me01en.htm> (2014).

⁴ Plato, *Cratylus*, 383ab. *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 12 translated by Harold N. Fowler*. Medford, William Heinemann Ltd, London 1921.

⁵ Plato, *Cratylus*, 384d.

⁶ E. Artemi, “The knowledge of the Triune God according to Isidore of Pelusium”, proceedings of The 12th International Symposium of Byzantologists Niš and Byzantium XII “CONSTANTINE, IN HOC SIGNO VINCES, 313 – 2013” 3-6 June 2013, (601-616), p. 605.

mind.⁷ God is infinite and incomprehensible and everything that is comprehensible about Him is His infinity and incomprehensibility. But all that we can affirm concerning God does not show forth God's nature, but only the qualities of His nature.⁸

The development of theology is based on the spiritual experience that is provided to the human being through the divine revelation⁹. The revelation of God to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and mainly to Moses is the first and basic knowledge – proof that a man can have for God's existence. For the Greek Fathers knowledge of God is an internal experience. It has as pillars the idea of communion, transfiguration and deification of man¹⁰. For Christians the gnosiology can be defined in the phrase of “the kingdom of God is within you”¹¹, because man can be led to a logical conception of Revelation of Triune God through faith.

II. Man's “knowledge” and “ignorance” – “agnoia” for God in the teaching of Gregory of Nyssa.

Gregory of Nyssa is regarded as exponent of the negative theology, and of the mystical tradition in Christianity. The supreme antinomy of the Triune God, unknowable and knowable, incommunicable and communicable, transcendent and immanent is the primary locus of his apophaticism. Moreover, the negative theology of the Gregory of Nyssa is balanced by his acute sense of the revelation of God ad extra, equally predicated of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.¹²

⁷ E. Artemi, “Gregory Nazianzen's trinitarian teaching based on his Twentieth Theological Oration -La doctrina trinitaria de San Gregorio Nacienceno basada en si Quinta Oración Teológica”, στο *De Medio Aevo* 4 (2013/2), (127-146), p. 139. Internet, <http://capire.es/eikonimago/index.php/demedioaevo/article/view/92/132>.

⁸ E. Artemi, “The knowledge of the Triune God according to Isidore of Pelusium”, proceedings of The 12th International Symposium of Byzantologists Niš and Byzantium XII “CONSTANTINE, IN HOC SIGNO VINCES, 313 – 2013” 3-6 June 2013, (601-616), p. 605.

⁹ E. Artemi, *The Triune God on the teaching of Isidore of Pelusium and the relationship to the teaching of Cyril of Alexandria*, Athens 2012, p. 327.

¹⁰ J. Meyendorff, *Living Tradition*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Boston 1978, p. 77.

¹¹ Luke 17:21.

¹² M. Plested, *The Macarian Legacy: the place of Macarius-Symeon in the eastern Christian*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, p. 57.

Gregory speaks about the unknowable and incommunicable of God with many and different ways in his writings. He demonstrates the presence of God in the world through examples, arguments and images. He explains how our soul should try to become purified for being able to realise the divine truth. In the Moses' life and in *Contra Eunomium* the Holy Father explains that the human beings cannot understand the “invisible”, “timeless”, “ineffable” of God, they make images of Him which reveal Him.¹³

In opposition to the Eunomium's teaching that the nature of God was absolutely comprehensible, Gregory explains and underlines as well the incomprehensibility and infinity of God and thereby gives to human being to a life of continual conversion in virtue, to an everlasting assimilation to God: “the perfection of human nature consists... in its very growth in goodness”¹⁴. Gregory affirms that God is unknowable – or at least that the “ousia” (being) of God is unknowable. Gregory finds theological justification for this in the concept of God's infinity.

God is eternal and beyond the time. This eternality results in God being of infinite expanse¹⁵: “But if the divine and unalterable nature is incapable of degeneracy, as even our foes allow, we must regard it as absolutely unlimited in its goodness: and the unlimited is the same as the infinite”¹⁶. It is possible through His sanctifying grace to be known His glory, holiness and magnificence. The knowledge of God is beyond man's power. God promised

¹³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, II, 1021-10: «When God was yet unknown to the human race because of the idolatrous error which then prevailed, those saints made him manifest and known to men, both by the miracles which are revealed in the works done by him, and from the titles by which the various aspects of divine power are perceived. Thus they are guides towards the understanding of the divine nature by making known to mankind merely the grandeur of their thoughts about God; the account of his being they left undiscussed and unexamined, as impossible to approach and unrewarding to those who investigate it».

¹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 2, 31. D. Ang, *The model of paradox in Christian theology: perspectives from the work of Henri de Lubac*, Sudney 2011, p. 8.

¹⁵ E. Brian, S. J. Daley, “Bright Darkness' and Christian Transformation: Gregory of Nyssa on the Dynamics of Mystical Union”, in *Finding God in All Things: Essays in Honor of Michael J. Buckley*, S. J., ed. M. J. Hines and St. J. Pope, Crossroad, New York 1996, 219. See also D. Carabine, “Gregory of Nyssa on the Incomprehensibility of God”, in *The Relationship between Neoplatonism and Christianity*, ed. Th. Finan and V. Twomey, Four Courts Press, Dublin 1992, 87.

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, 1.15. Originally translated for the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series II Vol. 5, Ed. by Ph. Schaff. Accessed at <http://ccel.org>.



that only those who are pure of their heart can have vision of God¹⁷. God is by nature beyond our sight, but He is visible in His activities “energeiai”, being perceived in the characteristics “idiomata” that surround Him. So, it is better for man to speak for the deeds of God but when he is going to speak about His essence, then man should remain silent.

God is not “object” of knowledge but of admiration. According to the poet’s words: “how majestic is your name in all the earth!”¹⁸ Gregory’s aim is to show that the beings of all the members of the godhead are infinite in goodness and power and life without distinction. The “ousia” of God has no “levels”. God in his nature is singular, simple, without opposite. It cannot degrade overtime and cannot change or lose its perfection, as even Eunomius argues.

In light of this, how can someone compare an infinite goodness in the Son to another infinite goodness in the Father and say that one is lesser and the other greater? Can one infinite good be lesser than another infinite good? Of course, not. In this way Gregory challenges the teaching of Eunomius that the Father and the Son are both perfect in goodness and yet the Father is superior to the Son.¹⁹

God’s essence cannot be approached by man. The latter can feel the divine grace and glory: “Let us not be ignorant of God’s nature which we recognize as his own wisdom and power and which we our minds comprehend”. As God’s infinite nature cannot be fully conceived by the human soul, so God does not seek to reveal Himself completely to those who seek Him. Rather, he reveals just enough to enlarge the desire of the soul for more so that the soul might ever press in closer and closer on its infinite path upwards. In Gregory’s own words:

We can conceive then of any limitation in an infinite nature; and that which is limitless, cannot by its nature be understood. And so every desire for the Beautiful which draws us on in this ascent is intensified by the soul’s very

¹⁷ VI. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Crestwood, ed. St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, New York 1997, p. 81.

¹⁸ Psalm 8:9.

¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* 1.19. See Also A. Bottiglia, “Gregory of Nyssa’s Infinite Progress: A challenge for an integrated theology”, *Greek Fathers CHS 662JZ*, http://westernthm.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/nyssa_on_infinity.pdf (2010), p. 4.



progress towards it. And this is the real meaning of seeing God: never to have this desire satisfied.²⁰

The man's desire for the knowledge and the vision of God is constantly satisfied and yet never satisfied. "Moses sought to see God and this is the instruction he receives on how he is to see Him: seeing God means following Him wherever He might lead".²¹

The knowledge for God sometimes has the same meaning with the ignorance for God and the vision of God in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa. The divine darkness leads to the enlightenment. It shows the encounter with God not as an act of comprehension but as a union beyond understanding²². He speaks for the vision of God expressed in terms of darkness rather than the prevailing light imagery.²³

This relation between dark and light, knowledge and ignorance for God, the Holy Father Moses' vision began with light; afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud. But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect, he saw God in the darkness. Gregory explains about the ignorance of God that "divine is there where the understanding does not reach".²⁴

That knowledge is cognitive is perhaps the first assumption with which one must do away, if he is to properly understand St. Gregory of Nyssa's concept of the divine darkness²⁵. Yet it is an assumption so basic to modern scientific

²⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Apologeticus on Hexaemeron*, PG 44, 72C.

²¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, II, 231-3, 238-9.

²² Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 202.

²³ M. Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, p. 111. D. Ang, *The model of paradox in Christian theology: perspectives from the work of Henri de Lubac*, Sudney 2011, p. 10.

²⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 6, 888A.

²⁵ "This is the true Knowledge of what is sought: 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 kind of darkness", Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 1, 95. Daniélou insists that Gregory gives new meaning to the term "darkness": "In Gregory of Nyssa, and especially in his later works, as the *Life of Moses*, and the *Commentary on Canticle of Canticles*, the term "darkness" takes on a new meaning and an essentially mystical connotation. It expresses the fact that the divine essence remains inaccessible even to the mind that has been enlightened by grace, and that the awareness of this inaccessibility constitutes the highest form of contemplation. Gregory's originality consists in the fact that he was the first to express this characteristic of the highest stages of mystical experience", J. Daniélou, "Introduction" in Herbert Musurillo, *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of*

thought that its influence is hardly given consideration, it is taken entirely as a base fact in the general arena of learning. Yet it is this very idea which Gregory addresses: the entire way of knowing with which we approach the knowledge of God. His is a knowing that goes beyond the confines and limitations of cognition, with its inherent inability to comprehend the transcendent.²⁶

It is a knowing that plunges into the negative, into the darkness of that place ‘where the understanding does not reach,’ and there finds the height of true knowledge. Gregory’s concept of mystical knowing is best expressed in his image of the divine darkness: a symbol that is perhaps one of his greatest gifts to the realm of Christian thought²⁷. It is presented most clearly in his famous text, *The Life of Moses*, and it is primarily from that text that this brief examination shall be made.²⁸

According to Gregory of Nyssa the knowledge about God is based on human mind and cannot be the correct guide for the “vision” of God, but the ignorance for the divine nature is based on the human soul. The man searches for the God and through his ignorance- the darkness of his mind for God, he can discover the divine truth. Only then the finite human being can see the infinite God. The indwelling of the Trinity is within the human person. As the godhead dwells within the soul, so is the soul able to relate to the person the knowledge of it, in a manner of knowing that is no longer sensory.

The soul acts as a mirror, which projects into one’s knowledge the very nature of God. The contemplation of God is not effected by sight and hearing, 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”.²⁹

This is the beginning of the knowledge of God by the heart – by the intimate presence of God Himself. Yet it is only faint, and is still blurred, as one would expect within a cloud. The soul must still be purified, and must become ever

Nyssa’s Mystical Writings, Scribner, New York 1961, repr. Crestwood, New York, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press 2001, p. 27.

²⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 1, 46.

²⁷ A. Papanikolaou, *Being With God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine–Human Communion*, Notre Dame, Indiana 2006, p. 18

²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 2, 157.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 1 Cor. 2:9, Isaiah. 64:4

more accustomed to this new way of knowing. It must, indeed, shed its reliance upon cognition, and embrace the seeming groundlessness of an ‘ineffable knowledge.’ The person “must wash from his understanding every opinion derived from some preconception and withdraw himself from his customary intercourse with his own companion, that is, with his sense perceptions, which are, as it were, wedded to our nature as its companion. When he is so purified, then he assaults the mountain”.³⁰

Generally, the ignorance of God can be equivalent to the darkness. God is the light. The separation of man from the God brought darkness to the mind and the heart of the human being. Vladimir Lossky underlines with a lyrical way that if God is known as light, the loss of this knowledge is darkness; and, since eternal life consists in “knowing the Father and His Son Jesus Christ”, absence of knowledge of God ends in the darkness of Hell. Light is the result for accompanying the union with God, whereas the dark reality can overrun human consciousness only when human consciousness dwells on the borders of eternal death and final separation from God.³¹

Thus the obvious sense of darkness seems to be, above all, pejorative³². If a man accepts his ignorance for the eternal God, He can detect the real knowledge for Him. The human soul will capture the God vision, only with its purification. Gregory analyses that only the purified man in heart can see the God.³³

Gregory teaches that only if the darkness “and the ignorance for God on the Mount Sinai will be changed into the light of true knowledge of Mount Tabor, man will be able to have the vision of God, the glorious face of God incarnate and the eternal uncreated light of the Triune God”³⁴. Also he says that the soul that truly loves God desires to be united with Him, man tries to find this union through the vision and knowledge God. He underlines that our true knowledge of God is that we do not and cannot know because that which we

³⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2, 157.

³¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2, 163

³² *Ibid*, 164.

³³ E. Artemi, “The sixth oration of Gregory Nyssa into the beatitudes”, *Koinonia*, 45 (2002) 167-174.

³⁴ Vl. Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, ed. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York 1974, p. 31.



seek is beyond our cognition. By its very nature the Divinity is higher than knowledge and comprehension.³⁵

III. The understanding of the mystical knowledge and vision of God by Moses based on the Song of the Songs

Gregory exposed the depth of his contemplative and mystical nature in his *Life of Moses* and again in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. His fifteen homilies on the *Song of Songs*, covering Song 1:1–6:8, have long been considered, along with his *Life of Moses*, a classic example of early Christian allegorical exegesis as well as the mature expression of Gregory's spiritual or mystical doctrine. Gregory intended these homilies to interpret the *Song of Songs* not for elite ascetics but for all serious Christians.³⁶

Gregory underlined that what the poem explain is not a record in the brain of what was perceived as a consequence of the sensorial experience of the soul's meeting with God, but only a translation of that mystical oneness with Him into a language of the outer senses³⁷. Gregory often speaks about Moses' life in *Canticum Canticorum*, but he never does the opposite. He doesn't refer to *Canticum Canticorum* in his work *Moses' life*. The Cappadocian father supported that we can learn about God through the divine teaching of the songs of David, Isaiah, Moses and many other men who had God's illumination.³⁸

The vision of God is appeared in the Holy Scriptures in two different and sometimes opposite types which are presented to be mutually exclusive. Some texts characterize the vision of God as impossibility. In the book of Exodus, for example, God tells Moses: "You cannot see My face; for no man can see My face and live"³⁹, while the psalmist notes that God "made darkness His

³⁵ E. Artemi, "The sixth oration of Gregory Nyssa into the beatitudes", *Koinonia*, 45 (2002) 173-174.

³⁶ M. DelCogliano, "Review for Norris, Richard A., Jr., trans. Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs, Writings from the Greco-Roman World 13, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012", published by RBL 2013 by the Society of Biblical Literature. For more information on obtaining a subscription to RBL, please visit <http://www.bookreviews.org/subscribe.asp>.

³⁷ Wl. Witalisz, "I cluppe and I cusse as I wood wore": Erotic Imagery in Middle English Mystical Writings", *Text Matters*, Vo.l 3 (3), 2013 10.2478/texmat-2013-0026, 58-70, p. 67.

³⁸ . Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of the Songs*, 1, 26.

³⁹ Ex. 33:20.

hiding place”⁴⁰ In the New Testament, the Apostle and Evangelist John writes: “No one has ever seen God”⁴¹, And the Apostle Paul adds that God is He “whom no one has ever seen or can see”⁴². As anyone can realise there is a strange relation between the invisibility and incomprehensibility of God. On the one hand His visibility concerns His attributes and His invisibility concerns His ousia – nature.

So, God’s existence is derived from our knowledge of God’s energies, and those energies are in turn known both indirectly and directly. The indirect route relies on the order apparent in the cosmos. The fact that the universe is orderly indicates that it is governed according to some rational plan, which implies the existence of a divine Planner⁴³. For Gregory there is no doubt that when it is said that God is – meaning that we can know that God exists.⁴⁴

Gregory’s views about the knowledge of God are brought out in his reflections on the life of Moses. The basic thing of Gregory’s explanation is the sequence of three theophanies (god’s presence) that punctuate Moses’ life⁴⁵. Moses is the image of every man who is thirsty for utter intimacy with God, and the three theophanies are stages on his journey to that intimacy⁴⁶. This ascension of man takes place in three stages. In the first God presents Himself in light – fire, so He vanishes any incorrect idea for Him. Then He appears in a cloud and then in darkness.

Each time, St. Gregory supported, Moses made a move that included some kind of sacrifice, God appeared. Moses left the palace of Pharaoh. He left, because he wanted to participate in the suffering of his people. Leaving Egypt, he went into the desert. There, God was presented in the burning bush. Then he became the leader of people from his own nation. As a leader led Jews to

⁴⁰ Psalm 17 [18]: 12

⁴¹ Jn 1:18 and 1 Jn 4:12.

⁴² 1 Tim 6:16. cf. G. Mantzaridis, “Moses and the vision of God”, 4/8/2014, *Internet*, <http://pemptousia.com/2014/08/23516>, p. 1.

⁴³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2, 168. Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of the Songs* 1. *Ibid* 11. *Ibid* 13.

⁴⁴ Brian E. Daley, S. J., “ 'Bright Darkness' and Christian Transformation: Gregory of Nyssa on the Dynamics of Mystical Union,” in *Finding God in All Things: Essays in Honor of Michael J. Buckley, S. J.*, ed. Michael J. Hines and Stephen J. Pope, New York: Crossroad, 1996, p. 219. See also D. Carabine, “Gregory of Nyssa on the Incomprehensibility of God,” in *The Relationship between Neoplatonism and Christianity*, ed. Th. Finan and V. Twomey, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1992, p. 87.

⁴⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of the Songs* 12.

⁴⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2, 227.2: “μηδαμοῦ ἴσασθαι τῆς ἀνόδου”.

the path, to the Promised Land, the land of God's promises. Arriving at Mount Sinai, God made his presence revealed midst thunder, voices, lightning and trumpets, and called Moses to go up to the mountain top. Moses went up. The tubes did not frighten him nor gnofos (cloud) that covered the mountain, nor thunder nor the darkness of the mountain where he met God. He met God and conversed with Him. God gave him the plates of Law. He carried the stone plates to Jews, while his lighting face was proof of God's appearance.⁴⁷

The first theophany is the burning bush⁴⁸. In this stage, Gregory takes light to be a symbol of knowledge. So the first stage of Moses' progress is the acquisition of purely intellectual knowledge of God⁴⁹. This fact shows to every Christian what he should do to stand in the field of the true light, and that it is impossible with his feet in shackles to run toward the mountain where the light of truth appears. Christians should get rid of any leather shoes metaphorically, literally the sins.

They have to free their soul from the covering of dead skins in which their nature was clad in the beginning when Adam and Eve disobeyed God's will and went away from Paradise⁵⁰. When Moses stood before the burning bush and took off his shoes, literally he got rid of the pleasures and any desires of this life. This purgation the contemplative must experience to make progress toward God.⁵¹

The second theophany occurred at top Mount Sinai⁵². The light was replaced by darkness. Moses became closer to perfection, he saw God in a cloud and, sheltered by a cloud, he participated in eternal life⁵³. In this stage of man's coming closer to God, the latter cannot be perceived with the external senses, but some sort of mystical awareness of God is achievable internally. The senses of sight and hearing are unable to "capture" the vision of God, but the more intimate senses of smell, taste, and touch are used for knowledge of

⁴⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of the Songs*, 12, 353-355.

⁴⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2, 1-116.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ [Gen. 2:4-3:24](#)

⁵¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 1, 116, 3-20. Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of the Songs* 1, 31. J. Beal, *Illuminating Moses: A History of Reception from Exodus to the Renaissance*, Brill, Leiden; Boston 2004, p. 349

⁵² Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2, 202 – 321.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

God⁵⁴. A closer examination of divine being who was hidden led into a cloud, which replaced visible things. As Moses – in the face of Moses, we have the picture of any man – ascended, the “inaccessible nature of Divinity” gradually becomes revealed to him and reason sees God in “the invisible and incomprehensible”, in “a radiant cloud.”⁵⁵

The third and final theophany revolved around Moses’ vision of God’s glory from the cleft in a rock⁵⁶, “When Moses reached the peak of Sinai and was enveloped in the “thick darkness where God was”⁵⁷, he had reached the summit of his climb. His physical journey could go no further. One might be tempted, then, to assume that this is also where his spiritual journey met its climax: the darkness has been reached, and perfection has been attained. Yet to Gregory’s mind, perfection has here only been attained in as much as the mountain peak is but the beginning. The climb up the mountain of knowledge has reached its summit, and it is now time for the spiritual journey to begin a new.

In the Song of the Songs, Gregory describes the three stages of man’s obtaining knowledge of God with these words:

τῷ μεγάλῳ Μωϋσῆ δια φωτὸς ἤρξατο ἡ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπιφάνεια, μετὰ ταῦτα διὰ νεφέλης αὐτῷ ὁ θεὸς διαλέγεται, εἶτα ὑψηλότερος καὶ τελειότερος ἤδη γενόμενος ἐν γνόφῳ τὸν θεὸν βλέπει. ὁ δὲ διὰ τούτου μανθάνο μεν τοιοῦτόν ἐστιν ἡ πρώτη ἀπὸ τῶν ψευδῶν καὶ πεπλανη μένων περὶ θεοῦ ὑπολήψεων ἀναχώρησις ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ σκότους εἰς φῶς ἐστὶ μετάστασις, ἢ δὲ προσεχεστέρα τῶν κρυπτῶν κατανόησις ἢ διὰ τῶν φαινομένων χειραγωγούσα τὴν ψυχὴν πρὸς τὴν ἀόρατον φύσιν οἷόν τις νεφέλη γίνεται τὸ φαινόμενον μὲν ἅπαν ἐπισκιάζουσα πρὸς δὲ τὸ κρύφιον βλέπειν τὴν ψυχὴν χειραγωγούσα καὶ συνεθίζουσα, ἢ δὲ διὰ τούτων ὀδεύουσα πρὸς τὰ ἄνω ψυχῆ, ὅσον ἐφικτόν ἐστι τῇ ἀνθρωπίνῃ φύσει καταλιπούσα, ἐντὸς τῶν ἀδύτων τῆς θεογνωσίας γίνεται τῷ θεῷ γνόφῳ πανταχόθεν διαληφθεῖσα, ἐν ᾧ τοῦ φαινομένου τε καὶ καταλαμβανομένου παντὸς

⁵⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of the Songs*, I. *Ibid* III. *Ibid* IV, cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2, 46: “Again the Scripture leads our understanding upward to the higher levels of virtue. For the man who received strength from the food and showed his power in fighting with his enemies and was the victor over his opponents is then led to the ineffable knowledge of God. Scripture teaches us by these things the nature and the number of things one must accomplish in life before he would at some time dare to approach in his understanding the mountain of the knowledge of God”.

⁵⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2, 202-321.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*

⁵⁷ Ex. 20:21

ἔξω καταλειφθέντος μόνον ὑπολείπεται τῆ θεωρία τῆς ψυχῆς τὸ ἀόρατόν τε καὶ ἀκατάληπτον, ἐν ᾧ ἐστὶν ὁ θεός, καθὼς φησι περὶ τοῦ νομοθέτου ὁ λόγος ὅτι εἰσῆλθε δὲ Μωϋσῆς εἰς τὸν γνόφον οὗ ἦν ὁ θεός.⁵⁸

God's manifestation to the great Moses began with light, after which he spoke through a cloud. Having risen higher and having become more perfect, Moses saw God in darkness. By this example we learn that our withdrawal from false, deceptive ideas of God is a transition from darkness into light. Next, a more careful understanding of hidden things leads the soul through appearances to God's hidden nature which is symbolized by a cloud overshadowing all appearances and which little by little accustoms the soul to behold what is hidden. Finally the soul is led on high. Forsaking what human nature can attain, the soul enters within the sanctuary of divine knowledge where it is hemmed in on all sides by the divine darkness. The soul forsakes everything without, that is, appearances and ideas; the only thing left for her contemplation is the unseen and unattainable in which God dwells.

In few words Moses' vision began with light; afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud. But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect, he saw God in the darkness⁵⁹. "For saking what human nature can attain, the soul enters within the sanctuary of divine nature where she is hemmed in on all sides by the divine darkness"⁶⁰. Moses and the bride went into darkness. The bride like Moses felt the divine presence, but they cannot realized Him, "bestows upon the soul a perception of his presence, although a clear apprehension escapes it since his invisible nature lies hidden"⁶¹.

Gregory comments on Song 3: 1 "on my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loved" and we find the bride, like Moses, "in the darkness where God was"⁶². The bride's entry into this darkness marks an apophatic ascent in which the bride moves through the marketplace of various levels of knowledge in order to find her Beloved by means of faith. The bride like Moses was embraced by the divine night and seeks him hidden in the darkness⁶³. The bride and Moses realized that the one whom they seek are

⁵⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of the Songs*, 11, 322, 9-323, 9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid. Ibid, homilies* 3, 1; 5, 2; 5, 5-6.

⁶⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of the Songs*, 11, 322, 9-323, 9.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 324, 8-12.

⁶² Exod. 20: 21. Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of the Songs*, 6, 181, 6.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 6, 181, 13-14. M. Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence*, Oxford University Press, New York 2007, p. 87.

known in not knowing⁶⁴: “τό ἐν μόνῳ τῷ μὴ καταλαμβάνεσθαι τί ἔστιν ὅτι ἔστι γινώσκομεν”.

Gregory of Nyssa supports that the knowledge of God is a steep mountain and difficult to climb -- most people scarcely reach its base. If one were like Moses, he would ascend higher and hear the sound of trumpets which become louder as one advances. For the preaching of the divine nature is truly a trumpet blast, which strikes the hearing, already loud at the onset, but becoming louder at the end.⁶⁵

It is possible these theopties of Moses neither to be described by man, nor to enumerate the variety. He stressed that Moses did not feel that get enough of God’s presence. He was avid in God’s vision and insatiable. He was hungry to see the face of God again and again. This desire was expressed to God. This wish of Moses was described in the book of Exodus⁶⁶. Gregory described it as a dialogue of Moses with God⁶⁷. In this dialogue the first asked from the latter to see Him all the time. God let Moses see His back. This back of God that Moses managed to distinguish symbolized God’s manifestation to his creature in his divine energies.⁶⁸

St. Gregory closed the book and explained what all the previous ones. He wrote: “God teaches us that everyone who wants to see Him; he must have the will to follow Him unceasingly. The theoria of His person is a continuous and unstoppable march of man towards Him”⁶⁹. At last St. Gregory highlighted three points: a) Moses had theopties. b) It was enough for him what he saw; He was wanting more. He was insatiable, and c) that view of God is to follow incessantly the Word.⁷⁰

The soul of man who wanted the theoria of God must return in paradise state, before the exile of man from it. If the man was not ready to know and “see” God, he would try to “wash” the clothes of his heart from the sin and clear his soul from the earthy thoughts. He must get rid of any kind of marriage

⁶⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of the Songs*, 6, 183, 2–3

⁶⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*

⁶⁶ Exod. 33: 12-23.

⁶⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of the Songs*, 12, 355-356

⁶⁸ Exod. 33:23. Al. F. Kimel Jr. (ed) *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, London 1992, p. 152.

⁶⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of the Songs*, 12, 355-356.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*



with the material things which tied any person in earth. So the heaven, the vision and knowledge of God was obscure for him. Moses tried to avoid this hindrance of no figurative thoughts.⁷¹

The Christian soul is seeking to be united with God, like the bride in the Song of Songs who tried hard to be united with her beloved. She wanted his kiss to feel him as united with her. Gregory compared the bride as Moses, who desires to take part in the God's theophany. The kiss of bridegroom to bride was similar to the speech of the triune God to Moses.⁷²

Conclusions

The Divine darkness was not synonym of blackness. It was not like a room which has no lights. This darkness was a positive reality that helped. Moses discovered God, and hence was called luminous. Although it sounded like a contradiction in terms, a luminous darkness was one which is filled with God's presence, and by faith could the soul begin to perceive the darkness. Moses' knowledge of God was the result of His presence in him by grace, the domain of the mystical life. In fact, the closer God came to the soul, the more intense the darkness becomes.⁷³

And it was then, with all other things of this world cleared away, that true vision God occurred: that the soul looked up to Him and never ceased to desire Him. Notice that the emphasis in this kind of spirituality fell on "seeing" rather than "knowing"⁷⁴. The soul, as Gregory supported, would be purified from the sins and then he had the reflection of God's light: "You have drawn nearer to me by your rejection of any contact with sin. By coming closer to the inaccessible Beauty you have yourself become beautiful, and like a mirror, as it were, you have taken on my appearance"⁷⁵. True knowledge and the vision of God consisted "in seeing that He is invisible, because He whom the soul seeks transcends all knowledge, separated from every part by his incomprehensibility as by a darkness"⁷⁶.

⁷¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of the Songs*, 1, 25-26.

⁷² *Ibid* 1, 31.

⁷³ "Not knowing in order to see God", *Internet*, https://www.okbu.edu/academics/DH_Williams_Virtue_Symposium.pdf, (2014), p. 10.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*.

⁷⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of the Songs*, 3, 71.

⁷⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2, 163.

Gregory retold the story of Moses and his vision of God through the commentary of the Song of the Songs. Moses wanted to be united with God and know Him as the bride tried to be united with her bridegroom. The ultimate goal of Moses, bride and every Christian was to drive themselves to an infinite progress in the never-completed journey to God. In this journey the love for the God will be bigger and the knowledge of God's attributes and not essence would capture the soul of every believer in Christ.

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