From Light to Darkness: The Progress of the Spiritual Journey according to Gregory of Nyssa’s De vita Moysis

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Introduction

In his De Vita Moysis (VM) Gregory of Nyssa describes the spiritual journey of the soul towards God. Part of that journey, the description of Moses’ encounter with God on Mt. Sinai, has aroused a lot of scholarly interest. Whether the depiction implies a mystical union between man and God on this spiritual journey is a question under discussion. If there is a mystical union, that means that there is a time when the soul exceeds its own sensual and intellectual limits and penetrates into God’s mystery. Jean Daniélou, Andrew Louth, and Warren Smith defend the idea of a mystical union by imposing on the structure of VM three stages of spiritual experience: purification, illumination and union.1 The difficulty of their position lies in that Gregory’s own elaboration in VM does not strictly follow the sequence of these three stages.2 The imposition of this three-fold framework cannot be reconciled with the fact that Gregory composes VM as a picture of Moses’ ever-higher ascent from one step to another. Martine Laird reads VM according to the sequence of Gregory’s narration. He finds it very hard to demonstrate a mystical union in this work, while the union is clearly present in Cant.3 Some other scholars deny the existence of a mystical stage in VM. For example, Ekkehard Mühlenberg, in his philosophical interpretation of Gregory’s idea of God’s infinity, stresses the radical


2 Daniélou, Platonisme, 17–18; Louth, Origins, 82–85; Smith, Passion, 153.

distinction between God’s essence and attributes. Mühlenberg thus holds that for Gregory the inaccessibility of God’s essence is uncompromised with human mystical union with God.4 Thomas Böhm, after investigating the philosophical significance of certain concepts in VM, such as ‘participation’, ‘likeness’, ‘theoria’, and ‘mystical’, concludes that the spiritual journey is concerned only with the intellectual contemplation of God. For Böhm the spiritual journey does not arrive at a union with God, but is always under the way of spiritual advancing instead.5

In this paper, I am going to show that the stage of mystical union can be found in VM without altering the sequence of its narration. Such a reading substitutes the three-fold schema proposed by Daniélou, Louth, and Smith with a two-fold division of the spiritual journey in VM: the preliminary stage and the mystical stage. Gregory connects the preliminary stage with human experience and uses the imagery of light to describe that stage; conversely he uses the imagery of darkness to describe the mystical stage.

The structure of VM consists of three sections: prologue, historia and theoria. The prologue gives a short explanation of the purpose of the treatise and introduces readers to the topic of perfection as perpetual progress. In historia Gregory presents the details of Moses’ life as found in Exodus and Numbers; in theoria he gives a symbolic interpretation of these events in the form of a description of a spiritual itinerary. Theoria begins with the birth of Moses, describes Moses’ first encounter with God in the burning bush (GNO VII/I 33.13–48.14), and then moves to the events in bringing Israelites out of Egypt (GNO VII/I 48.14–82.3). There are two further encounters between Moses and God, first in the darkness (GNO VII/I 82.4–110.2) and then when Moses sees God’s back from a cleft in the rock (GNO VII/I 110.3–122.5). Finally there is a battle between Moses and evil (GNO VII/I 122.5–138.13), and a concluding commentary (GNO VII/I 138.14–143.18). Moses’ three encounters with God, first in the burning bush, then in the darkness and last in the cleft of the rock, are called theophanies. The second and the third theophanies constitute a single scene of Moses’ encounter with God on Mt. Sinai.6

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6 There are different opinions on what are the second and the third theophanies in VM. For example, Andrew Louth identifies the second theophany with cloud, and the third theophany with darkness. (See Louth, Origins, 81–86). In fact, starting from Moses’ encounter with God in the cloud, Moses enters into a continuous growth in God’s presence. How to define