Ann Conway-Jones


This study is the reworking of a doctoral dissertation; one that grew out of attentiveness (*prosōche*) in an undergraduate class. The author noticed that while many expositors speak of Gregory’s themes of ascent to darkness in his *Life of Moses*, very few pay enough attention to see that the author does not actually say much about darkness in that treatise (3 paragraphs) but, on the other hand, does make many repeated references (32 paragraphs) to the ‘tabernacle not made by hands.’ The primary thesis of the present work wishes to redress this imbalance of critical attention, and consider the concept of heavenly ascent to the Temple, as well as how this is taken up and refracted in early Christian (and Jewish) theology, with the *Vita Moysi* (2: 170–201) being the primary example, the *locus* where Moses, having been admitted into the divinely charged darkness on Mount Sinai (Ex. 20,21) is, in that exalted mystery, shown a model of the holy Tabernacle which the Israelites are commanded to build, to enshrine God’s enduring presence on earth (Ex. 25,8–9). This is described as a ‘Tabernacle not made by human hands’ (*acheiropoietos skenē*). The writers of the early Church, as Conway-Jones demonstrates, were more than interested in this notion in liturgical, Christological, and mystico-epistemic terms. The idea is treated in a long school of patristic writers: Clement, Origen, Gregory the Theologian, Gregory Nyssen, Methodius, Jerome, Theodoret, and Bede. Conway-Jones notes how the loss of a sense of typological relevance in the advent of modern biblical criticism has accounted for the loss of connection with the Ancients who saw in this theme a major road to articulate the concept of ascent to the divine. Most importantly she notes that the entrance into divine darkness, for Gregory Nyssen, is hardly apophatic in the sense of being a mystical ‘silence’ as some commentators have concluded (perhaps anachronistically following Dionysius the Areopagite’s terms of argument) when it is so charged with the specific instruction that the construction of the tabernacle will provide the ‘royal’ pathway to God.

The terms of Conway-Jones’ study thus take up a definite neglect in modern patristic studies on this theme which is only recently beginning to be addressed, such as in the works of bishop Alexander Golitzin on the *merkabah* and *hekhalot* theology of ascent present in Jewish and patristic thought, or intimations given in Martin Laird’s 2004 study (*Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith*) or Morwenna Ludlow’s 2007 attempt to read the Nyssen in terms of post-modern critical analysis (*Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)Modern*).
Jewish scholars have not neglected the tabernacle theme, however, but have consistently seen it as central to the concept of the ascent to the vision/union with God: all the more so in the generations following the actual destruction of the Jerusalem temple. Ezekiel is one of the first major approaches to this, and also 1 Enoch 14, but in the early Christian period Philo, himself a significant source of Nyssen’s *Life of Moses*, leads the idea into deep connections with Platonic epistemic theory, to make the issue one of connection between human consciousness and diviner revelation. Considering the extent to which Temple imagery, used Christologically and soteriologically in the Fourth Gospel, is so prevalent in that most seminal text, it is extraordinary to account for the neglect of the theme among the Christian scholars (though the Gospel’s approach to the tabernacle theme is not heavily referenced in the present study). To this extent Conway-Jones’ attentiveness to what this major Greek father was actually saying reaps a rich reward, and her work opens up a significant theme that regularly seeks to cast aside later, and false, ambivalences, of readings that try to insert too strict a difference between ‘mysticism’ and ‘theology,’ or ‘exegesis’ and ‘philosophy.’

Conway-Jones patiently exegetes both the primary texts and the numerous commentators who have referred to them. The work is a model of careful exposition; approaching her primary source from the triple angle of: what Gregory has to say about the biblical episode, what he has to teach in terms of theology, and what explicitly he says about ‘heavenly ascent.’ The treatment gives full attention to Jewish scholars; especially on the *hekhalot* literature.

Conway-Jones notes that while Gregory conceives of the obedient disciple’s entrance into the tabernacle, it is not equated in the *Vita Moysi*, with entrance before the presence of God. In the *Vita Moysi* it is entrance into a place. Scholars who speak of Nyssen’s sense of “entrance into the presence” import the phrase from his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. The place spoken of in the *Vita* is, for Gregory, the realm of pure Ideas, where the soul having been purified and made ascensive, is able to grasp the divine theology. This echoes a considerable amount of what he had learned from his two immediate teachers, Origen and Gregory Nazianzen, who take a similar line. It would have been instructive to learn whether Conway-Jones thought the Nyssen actually made a development from that highly philosophical sense of epistemic ascent of the *Logos*, towards the idea of an entrance of the *Nous* into a more personal communion with the divine presence (a theme which is marked in later Byzantine interpretations of this patristic idea, with new semantic freight being added to the basic terms in order to connote it).

As the study demonstrates well, Gregory of Nyssa masterfully combines all the different resonances of the theme of ascent to the tabernacle (Christolog-