

# “DAZZLING DARKNESS”: THE MYSTICAL OR THEOPHANIC THEOLOGY OF ST GREGORY OF NYSSA

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**Abstract:** The upsurge of interest in the writings of St Gregory of Nyssa, the youngest of the so-called Cappadocian fathers in the twentieth century, occasioned a re-thinking of the saint’s vision of the mystical life, traditionally portrayed simply as an ascent from initial luminosity to increasing impenetrable darkness. Already, his unexpected phrase, “dazzling darkness” found in his treatise, *The Life of Moses* – arguably the most comprehensive presentation of his theophanic theology – dictates a far more nuanced approach to his mystical theology. This paper presents St Gregory’s understanding of the spiritual journey and encounter with God bringing to the fore the comprehensive and synthetic dimensions of the darkness texts including both their apophatic and cataphatic elements. It also highlights the Christo-soteriological framework of the treatise. The paper concludes by highlighting the importance of the Nyssen’s quite unique understanding of the ‘darkness’ metaphor for theology today, one which allows for the real possibility of a vision and encounter with God without this in any way compromising his inexhaustibility.

**O**f the three Cappadocian fathers, St Gregory of Nyssa<sup>1</sup> is widely recognised today as the great spiritual master of mystical theology. In contemporary scholarly circles, mystical theology generally refers to a specific approach with regards to the theological task concerned more to express the truths of God in existential terms. Its ultimate aim is to open up the way for the mystery of God to be approached,

beheld, lived and experienced<sup>2</sup> rather than objectively understood. Accordingly, it is an approach to theology understood as union with, and vision of, God as opposed to mere apprehension or speculation of him devoid of experience. In this sense, the term ‘mystical’ could easily be equated with the term ‘theophanic’, indeed a very important identification for our study of St Gregory of Nyssa. From the outset it must be noted that it was not so much St Gregory’s interest to express the Christian mystery from within a framework which presupposed a theophanic encounter that distinguished him from patristic writers before him – as the majority of fathers were also concerned with safeguarding the Church from any erroneous teaching that could have hindered humanity’s union with God. Rather, that which set St Gregory apart from other fathers in general and the Cappadocians in particular was the innovative approach to his understanding of the vision of God expressed in terms of darkness rather than the prevailing light imagery. Hence, instead of presenting the Christian life as a transformative journey towards increasing luminosity, St Gregory put forward a vision of a person’s ascent towards God in terms of increasing impenetrable opacity. To be sure, for his reinstatement of the symbol of darkness back into the mainstream of mystical theology, today he has been awarded epithets such as the “poet and dramatist of darkness”<sup>3</sup> or the “undisputed founder of mystical theology.”<sup>4</sup>

In light of the above introductory remarks, the purpose of the paper is twofold: first, to present St Gregory’s mystical theology and in so doing to demonstrate that whilst he was most definitely a proponent of darkness, seeing this as the place *par excellence* of God’s intimate presence, his mystical theology and his understanding of darkness is by far more nuanced. The symbol of light, for example, also played an equally important role not only in his understanding of the spiritual journey but also humanity’s union with God. Modern scholarship is beginning to point this out. Conway-Jones, for example, noted that those sections dealing with darkness in St Gregory’s *Life of Moses* in reality devoted less attention to darkness than they did an interpretation of the mystical vision of the heavenly tabernacle including the priestly vestments.<sup>5</sup> Whilst Laird’s study also underlined the importance of the light motif, it seems

to have done this at the expense of downplaying the darkness texts and in this way failing to hold together the complexities of the Nyssen's theophanic theology which cannot be reduced to one or the other aspect.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore hoped that this paper might redress the often one-sided approach to his mystical theology exclusively in terms of darkness,<sup>7</sup> or in response to this the attempt to downplay the significance of the darkness texts and to see St Gregory more as a 'mystic of light'. Accordingly, the paper will argue that contemporary scholarship has to a large extent ignored the multi-faceted aspect of the darkness motif thus often overlooking the Nyssen's commensurate concern for a synthetic approach of these texts which include both cataphatic and apophatic elements. Accordingly, it will be shown that St Gregory's vision of mystical union incorporated both, and thus his mystical theology, particularly as evidenced in his important treatise *The Life of Moses*, was no less one of light than of darkness and indeed a darkness paradoxically overflowing with light.

More specifically, in firstly introducing *The Life of Moses* the paper will underscore the Christo-salvific framework within which treatise ought to be situated. Having highlighted the main thread running throughout the entire work, the paper will then focus on the structure and content of the work as this will serve as the basis for the subsequent analysis of the Nyssen's tripartite theophanic theology presented in terms of a light-cloud-darkness sequence. The essential purpose of the article will be to determine the precise nature of 'darkness,' in order to see the extent to which it ultimately remained faithful to a more comprehensive vision towards union with the ineffable – yet at the same time fully revealed – divine mystery of God.

### **The Life of Moses**

*The Life of Moses*,<sup>8</sup> written towards the end of St Gregory's life,<sup>9</sup> is arguably the most comprehensive and mature presentation<sup>10</sup> of the saint's mystical theology.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, there has been a growing tendency in patristic scholarship to regard this treatise as the crowning work of St Gregory's mystical or theophanic theology.<sup>12</sup> Thoroughly based on the Scriptures, this work lends itself as a kind of "road-map" or "guide" (ὁδηγίαν)<sup>13</sup>

indicating the means for approaching and experiencing the mystery of God. Following an already established exegetical tradition,<sup>14</sup> the work takes the biblical figure Moses as a paradigm for outlining the pinnacle of the human encounter with God.<sup>15</sup> Now, for St Gregory, such a method rested and was justified on the hermeneutic principle that Moses was ultimately an image or “type” (τύπος) of Christ<sup>16</sup> himself and thus to follow the example of Moses was, in the final analysis, to commit oneself to following Christ. This is seen clearly in St Gregory’s depiction of Moses on mount Sinai, for example, when he had received the tables of stone containing the divine law:

Moses was transformed to such a degree of glory that the mortal eye could not behold him. Certainly he who has been instructed in the divine mystery of our faith knows how the contemplation of the spiritual sense agrees with the literal account. For when the restorer of our broken nature (you no doubt perceive in him the one who healed our brokenness) had restored the broken table of our nature to its original beauty – doing this by the finger of God, as I said – the eyes of the unworthy could no longer behold him. In his surpassing glory he becomes inaccessible to these who would look upon him.<sup>17</sup>

In this case, an obvious connection can be seen between Moses and Jesus. Moses is seen as a ‘type’ of Christ and is thus depicted as prefiguring the incarnate Christ. In the text, the “restorer of our broken nature,” which is Christ, is identified with Moses. The glory of Christ which will be beheld when the Son of Man, with all his angels, will sit on the throne of glory (cf. Mt 25:31) is prefigured in the shining face of Moses as he came down from mount Sinai. In the same way that the Lord’s glory will scarcely be visible to the righteous, so too was the face of Moses “inaccessible to these who would look upon him.” In this sense, the purpose of *The Life of Moses* when seen from this Christological viewpoint is the salvation of the human person in particular and the created realm more generally through Jesus Christ as exemplified through Moses.<sup>18</sup> It is important to stress the general Christo-soteriological framework of the work otherwise the main point will not only not be appreciated but the symbolism will be seen to be misdirected and therefore devoid of any real meaning. Balthasar stressed

the Nyssen's uniquely Christocentric perspective when he stressed that the governing principle was,

...none other than Gregory's very Christianity. Although it is possible that there may be influences drawn from the mysticism of Philo of Plotinus, especially with regard to the idea of infinite desire and eternal progress in the knowledge of God, above all else there is Christ, the living way.<sup>19</sup>

Only when Christ and salvation are seen as the governing principle of this treatise will the mystical dimension of his thought, namely his mystical or theophanic theology, be discerned and in fact appreciated. Having highlighted the main thread running throughout the entire work, I will focus now on the structure and content of the work as this will serve as the basis for our subsequent analysis of St Gregory's theophanic theology.

The treatise is written as a response to a question asked of St Gregory by a certain "Caesarius, a man of God"<sup>20</sup> we are told – perhaps a young novice entering the monastic life and wanting counsel on the "perfect life" (τέλειος βίος). It develops this main theme of perfection by employing symbols of light, darkness, infinite progress and union with God. Divided into two parts – not including the preface and conclusion – the first deals with a literal interpretation, a narrative (ιστορία)<sup>21</sup> of the actual life of Moses as depicted in Exodus and Numbers. Considerable detail is given to the theophanies of Moses as they provide the context for an allegorical interpretation representing the mystical journey leading to a person's encounter with God. These theophanies include the account of Moses' vision of God on Mount Horeb at the burning bush (Ex 3:2) – namely, a vision of light where Moses was ordered to remove the sandals from his feet as the place upon which he was standing was sacred ground (Ex 3:2-6); secondly, Moses' vision of God on the clouded mountain top of Sinai (Ex 19:18) and the third theophany has to do with Moses' subsequent encounter with God "in the thick darkness where God was" (Ex 20:21 and Ex 33:20-33).<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, these three theophanies provide the context for St Gregory's subsequent delineation of the three phases of the Christian life or, more particularly, how the human person can encounter and attain union with God.

The second part of the treatise, which, according to St Gregory, is a contemplation (θεωρία)<sup>23</sup> of these three biblical theophanies so that the spiritual meaning of the Scriptural narrative may be uncovered, illustrates how these correspond to the three stages or moments of his mystical theology.<sup>24</sup> Corresponding to the three theophanies of Moses, St Gregory concluded that a person's encounter of the mystery of God involved a successive entry into light (φῶς), cloud (νεφέλη) and darkness (γνόφος).<sup>25</sup> This tripartite light-cloud-darkness sequence is reflected upon at length in the *Life of Moses* but is succinctly brought together in his *Commentary on the Songs of Songs*:

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 [Τῷ μεγάλῳ Μωϋσεῖ διά φωτός ἤρξατο ἡ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐμφάνεια. Μετά ταῦτα διά νεφέλης αὐτῷ διαλέγεται. Εἶτα ὑψηλότερος ἦδη καί τελειότερος γενόμενος, ἐν γνόφῳ τόν Θεόν βλέπει].<sup>26</sup>

Unlike his predecessors who had seen mystical theology as a vision of God leading the person out of darkness and into light – as for example in Origen and most notably in Evagrius<sup>27</sup> – for St Gregory the opposite is true. The spiritual life begins with light and progresses to deeper and deeper darkness. Indeed, St Gregory was responsible for making popular the idea of divine darkness in mystical theology by placing it in the centre of his works. The first stage in one's quest to encounter God involved, for St Gregory, fleeing the deceptive darkness of sin and ignorance in order to be illumined – hence Moses' vision of God in terms of light at the burning bush. The second stage presupposed detachment from the realm of sense perception where God was seen to be utterly different from the world. The 'cloud,' namely, the intermingling of light and darkness, was the beginning of one's awareness of a mysterious or ontological gap between the Creator and the created realm. Whereas this second stage involved a journey from light into partial darkness, the third and crucial theophany entailed entering the darkness of Sinai where God is, namely, the realisation upon encountering and even being united with God that He is utterly incomprehensible. What can be seen, therefore, in St Gregory's vision of the mystical life is a striking reversal of symbolism. As will be shown,

however, the fact that this darkness is described as ‘dazzling’, namely a darkness which is paradoxically so full of light and luminosity, leaves no margin of doubt that, for St Gregory, the ‘darkness’ symbol was far more complex and included ‘light’ as well. Consequently, his mystical theology of darkness cannot be reduced to one aspect at the expense of others. Indeed, what will be argued is that a ‘synthetic’ approach is necessary in order to appreciate his vision of the Christian life.

## St Gregory’s Mystical or Theophanic Theology

### *Light*

The beginning of one’s ascent to God in freedom,<sup>28</sup> for St Gregory, is expressed in terms of light: “religious knowledge comes at first to those who receive it as light.”<sup>29</sup> This was considered to be a movement from the darkness of ignorance to the light of truth and communion with the Word. For St Gregory, this meant a withdrawal from the darkness of erroneous beliefs to an illumination brought about by “the rays of the true light [τῶν ἀκτίνων τοῦ ἀληθινοῦ φωτός]”<sup>30</sup> since “truth is light [ἡ δὲ ἀλήθεια φῶς ἐστι].”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the treatise refers to Christ as “the light of divinity [τῆς θεότητος φῶς]”<sup>32</sup> and “the true light and the truth itself [τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια].”<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, what is seen here is a movement from falsehood to the true light of Christ’s truth.<sup>34</sup> Characteristic of this theophany – and indeed the ensuing ones – is that it is the incarnate Christ who is beheld. And it is precisely because the vision is one of Christ that the mystery of truth – namely, the true light – is beheld. Now, being a vision of Christ implies also a soteriological dimension to the theophany. St Gregory’s mention of Moses’ rod changing into a serpent signified Christ taking on a sinful humanity. On this he wrote:

The change from a rod into a snake should not trouble the lovers of Christ – as if we were adapting the doctrine of the incarnation to an unsuitable animal [...]. “The Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert” (Jn 3:14). The teaching is clear [...] that the Lord was “made into sin for our sake” (2 Cor 5:21) by being invested with our sinful nature. This figure therefore is rightly applied to the Lord, for if sin is a serpent and the Lord became sin, the logical conclusion should be

evident to all: by becoming sin he became also a serpent which is nothing other than sin. For our sake he became a serpent that he might devour and consume the Egyptian serpents produced by the sorcerers.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, by taking on sinful human nature, Christ transformed it allowing the world to thus participate in a radically new mode of existence. St Gregory noted:

What is impassible by nature did not change into what is passible, but what is mutable and subject to passions was transformed into impassibility through its participation [κοινωνία] in the immutable.<sup>36</sup>

Consequently it is clear, here, that the ascent towards God is a journey inextricably linked to Christ, characterised both by apprehension of Christ as the ‘true light’ and participation or communion in this reality. Moreover, one underwent such a radical transformation that one was enabled also to share or participate in this divine life by becoming more and more Christ-like.

Realistic of the fallen human predicament, St Gregory noted that even this initial stage of one’s journey towards God was wrought with many difficulties and for this reason the majority of people would hardly make any further progress: “The knowledge of God is a mountain steep indeed and difficult to climb – the majority of people scarcely reach its base.”<sup>37</sup> St Gregory explained that the reason for this was that a person’s experience of light, when accustomed to long-standing darkness, was both painful and unpleasant. He described it in the following manner:

The history agrees with what now happens: for to the one who has left behind the Egyptian pleasures which he served before crossing the sea, life removed from these pleasures seems at first difficult and disagreeable. But if the wood be thrown into the water, that is, if one receives the mystery of the resurrection, which had its beginning with the wood (you of course understand the “cross” when you hear “wood”), then the virtuous life, being sweetened by the hope of things to come, becomes sweeter and more pleasant than all the sweetness that tickles the senses with pleasure.<sup>38</sup>

It was only after a commitment had been made to embrace the salvific mystery of the resurrection inaugurated by Christ's crucifixion – which first involved detachment from the 'Egyptian' pleasures – that the light of Christ could be seen to be appealing, alluring and captivating, a life truly refreshing and indeed liberating. Again, the possibility for this ascent springs forth from Christ and his life-saving cross and resurrection.

At this initial light-filled experience of God at the burning bush,<sup>39</sup> Moses was ordered to remove the sandals from his feet as he was standing on sacred ground. St Gregory interpreted this scene as an exhortation for ongoing moral purification for those wishing to experience God. Commenting on this, Meredith correctly pointed out that unlike Plato for whom moral purity was a prerequisite for enlightenment, for St Gregory, the opposite was true:

The difference from Plato, whose *Republic* has a good deal to say about the need for moral purification as a prelude to mental growth, lies largely in this, that for Gregory some enlightenment, in this case the theophany at the burning bush, *precedes* the demand for purity.<sup>40</sup>

Not only is Meredith's remark important for highlighting the uniquely Christian character of St Gregory's writings in general but it has far-reaching implications for the Christian life. For St Gregory, moral purity without a sense that it too was a gift from God presupposing his initiative to communicate in the first place would be at best displaced, if not totally destructive for one aspiring to encounter God. It could easily lead a person into a sense of isolated self-sufficiency where the procurement of the virtues would remain the ultimate goal – and this in an exteriorly artificial manner – and not God. It was for this reason that the Nyssen wrote: "the voice which is melodious and ascends to God's hearing is not the cry made with the organs of speech, but the meditation sent up from a pure conscience."<sup>41</sup> Warning against a perfunctory understanding of purity and the moral life, St Gregory did, however, highlight the importance of purity and would have definitely seen it as a *conditio sine qua non* leading to a greater understanding of the mysteries of God. In this way he wrote that the one "whose intellect has been purified [ὄς διανοία κεκαθαυμένη]

by crossing the water [...] it is this person who then advances to the contemplation of the transcendent nature [τῆι τῆς ὑπερκειμένης φύσεως θεωρίᾳ].”<sup>42</sup> If purification established the fertile ground for one’s encounter with God, then this presupposed God’s initiative to reveal himself and to enable the virtuous life in the first place as no amount of inner cleansing would ever be able to lead to an encounter with God.

### ***Cloud***

Having been enlightened with the light of God, the person would subsequently begin to realise that God’s nature transcends human concepts and would thus begin to sense being overshadowed by a cloud.<sup>43</sup> Far from being a regression from God, the ‘cloud’ on the contrary symbolised a progressive realisation of the inaccessibility of God’s splendour. On this Mateo-Seco wrote: “the shadows of which he [the Nyssen] is speaking are not those of the obscurity of error, but the luminous obscurity inherent in the splendor of the truth.”<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, as one continued in their ascent towards God, the cloud became symbolic of the growing awareness of the incomprehensibility of God. In this way, from clear appearances, the seeker would come to appreciate the importance of forsaking phenomenal appearances, and in their place would begin to read between the lines of reality in order to find God therein. In this sense, the light of the ‘first stage’ led to the ever-increasing transformative obscurity of cloud and ultimately darkness. Quite simply, it is here that the person became aware of the immediacy of God in a way that surpassed knowledge. During this stage, the person, according to St Gregory, came to realise an understanding of the hidden things of God which are beyond what the discursive mind can understand and perceive. This stage required a person to become accustomed to the fact that knowledge of God is paradoxically one which transcends both the senses and the intellect. According to St Gregory it was only after Moses drove away the herd of animals – namely, rational and discursive thinking – that he was able to begin his ascent towards the mountain:

When this had been accomplished and the herd of irrational animals had been driven as far from the mountain as possible, Moses then approached

the ascent to lofty perception. That none of the irrational animals was allowed to appear on the mountain signifies, in my opinion, that in the contemplation of the intelligibles we surpass the knowledge which originates with the senses [...]. The contemplation of God is not effected by sight and hearing, nor is it comprehended by any of the customary perceptions of the mind.<sup>45</sup>

Seen from this perspective, the cloud imagery therefore in no way would want to deny the possibility of genuinely knowing God, but rather affirm that in approaching and experiencing the mystery of God, no statements can ever contain or wholly grasp the fullness of God's transcendence. Accordingly, the cloud metaphor, as the second stage of the Christian life for St Gregory, was the predilection that had to be acquired by a person for non-reliance on the senses. In laying stress on the necessary limitations of all conceptual thinking, St Gregory was in no way deploring the use of coherent and discursive reasoning, but rather highlighting its limitations due to the intrinsic ineffability of the divine essence. In so doing, St Gregory put forward a synthetic perception of reality where intuition and mystical awareness were given prominence as the way towards encountering God. It is at this stage that the seeker began to discern that in encountering God one would inevitably be led into a supra-sensible and supra-intellectual reality, a place characterised by darkness.

### ***Darkness***

The mystical ascent towards God that began with light and subsequently moved into a growing sense of obscurity when it came to the intrinsic being of God now culminated into a reality marked by impenetrable darkness. Yet, far from being a negative term, darkness,<sup>46</sup> for St Gregory, was ultimately a positive symbol signifying quite paradoxically God's profound presence with humanity. Indeed, for St Gregory, the symbol of darkness marked the pinnacle of the spiritual journey towards God. Like the cloud motif, it was also used to underscore the fact that the human mind is unable to grasp and comprehend the fullness of God's nature yet now in a formidably more immediate and intense manner. In this sense, it served to safeguard the inexhaustible nature of God. In the excerpt that

follows – and which is quoted in full because of its significance for St Gregory’s use of the darkness metaphor – we see that at this third and final stage of a person’s mystical encounter with God, a vision is granted which entails “seeing that consists in not seeing.” Indeed, that which is arguably the most fascinating aspect of the following excerpt – as well as other passages in the treatise – is the way paradoxical elements are easily integrated into one comprehensive reality, something often difficult for a twenty-first century mind to comprehend whose reality is, more often than not, fragmented and disjointed.<sup>47</sup> The third stage is described as follows:

What does it mean that Moses entered the darkness and then saw God in it? What is now recounted seems somehow to be contradictory to the first theophany, for then the divine was beheld in light but now He is seen in darkness. Let us not think that this is at variance with the sequence of things we have contemplated spiritually. Scripture teaches by this that religious knowledge comes at first to those who receive it as light. Therefore what is perceived to be contrary to religion is darkness; an escape from darkness comes about when one participates in the light. But as the mind progresses and, through an ever greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality, as it approaches more nearly to contemplation, it sees more clearly that God cannot be contemplated. For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence’s yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sort transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Therefore John the sublime who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says “no one has ever seen God,” thus asserting that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by humans but also by every intelligent creature. When, therefore, Moses grew in knowledge, he declared that he had seen God in the darkness, that is, that he had then come to know that what is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension, for the text says, “Moses approached the dark cloud where God was.”<sup>48</sup>

The experience is both an apophatic and cataphatic one. The ‘dazzling’ characteristic of darkness is clearly symbolic of a positive vision of the divine glory. From within this uniquely resplendent perspective, divine darkness, for St Gregory, signified at least two realities: firstly, the

incomprehensibility and inaccessibility of God's essence and secondly in a paradoxical manner his intimate presence.<sup>49</sup> And so, in this coincidence of opposites, God, for St Gregory, was said to be seen invisibly and comprehended incomprehensibly. In juxtaposing darkness with the qualifier 'dazzling,' St Gregory wonderfully brought together both the utter transcendence of God yet at the same time his genuine immanence. He, therefore, would not have left his readers believing that any mystical encounter with God was impossible. On the contrary, they would have come to realise that union with God was entirely a gift of God's divine grace and not a result of their cognitive faculties. Furthermore, from the perspective of the Godhead, the darkness symbolism in no way implied that there is anything lacking in God. Quite the opposite, far from presenting darkness as emptiness it is presented as fullness both for God and the believer. It is the place where God dwells and thus the place where one encounters God, namely, "the ground of man's [*sic*] self-transcendence."<sup>50</sup> And so, the place where one encounters God is said to be dark not because of an absence of light but because there is such an excess of striking light that the divine life, from the perspective of the human person, is experienced as darkness. Accordingly, the darkness, for St Gregory, was a positive encounter with God, a real vision of the glory of God transcending discursive reasoning. Arguably, St Gregory's understanding of mystical knowledge in terms of a real encounter of the utter transcendence of God, bestowed upon human persons as a gift and by no means as a result of the cognitive abilities, has been one of the greatest contributions to the Christian understanding of the spiritual life. Consequently, the vision of God in darkness can be a significant reminder in modern understandings of spirituality that God, as God truly is, can only ever be experienced when a person is willing to go beyond the light of seeing and into the thick darkness of genuine mystical knowledge of God.

In expressing the experience of union with God in terms of dazzling darkness, St Gregory set out to describe in quite a lengthy part of his treatise what was actually seen in Moses' encounter with God in the darkness. The descriptions, for example, of the heavenly and earthly tabernacles which Moses beheld are key texts in showing the dazzling or luminous

dimension of this impenetrable darkness where God was. The “tabernacle not made with hands” for example, which Moses beheld in the darkness is interpreted to be Christ, more specifically Christ’s theandricity:

What then, is that tabernacle not made with hands [ἀχειροποίητος ἐκείνη σκηνή] which was shown to Moses on the mountain and to which he was commanded to look as to an archetype [...]. This tabernacle would be “Christ, who is the power and the wisdom of God,” who in his own nature was not made with hands, yet capable of being made 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 pre-existence but created in having received this material composition.<sup>51</sup>

The significance of this lies in the fact that the darkness, far from being a reality of emptiness, is on the contrary one filled with overflowing luminosity which is now further explained to be none other than Christ. Therefore, far from constituting an undifferentiated impersonal encounter, St Gregory’s understanding of one’s union with God in terms of ‘dazzling darkness’ served to emphasise the ‘prosopocentric’ nature of humanity’s encounter with God. Once again, this is a reminder of the thoroughly Christo-soteriological framework of the entire treatise. But also, it would not be an exaggeration to state that what is seen here is a precursor to the Church’s subsequent clearly articulated dyophysite yet at the same time prosopocentric Christology of Chalcedon.

A further dimension of the dazzling darkness symbolism understood as one’s mystical encounter with God is its ‘epectatic’ character, namely a relationship characterised by perpetual progress, or more precisely, an endless ‘following God’ into all eternity.<sup>52</sup> In his desire to see God’s glory in the darkness, Moses spoke with God directly, pleading with him that his request to see him face to face – namely, not in “mirrors and reflections”<sup>53</sup> but according to his true being – be granted. The book of Exodus (33:17-23) recounts this divine encounter by drawing attention to the fact that Moses was allowed to behold the “back” (ὀπίσθιον) of God, not his “face.” It is further noted that the Lord placed Moses into a cleft of a rock initially covering Moses’ face with his hand, only to take it away after He had passed by, thereby allowing Moses to see the glory of God from behind.

St Gregory understood Moses' vision of the 'back' of God firstly in terms of 'following' God in absolute trust and dedication and doing so for all eternity. After drawing attention to the absurdity of a literal interpretation of the passage of Moses' encounter of the 'back' of God – since God is without form and therefore without 'front' or 'back'<sup>54</sup> – St Gregory wrote that to see the 'back' of God implied the following:

He who follows see the back. So Moses, who eagerly seeks to behold God, is now taught how he can behold him: to follow God wherever he might lead [...]. His passing by signifies his guiding the one who follows, for someone who does not know the way cannot complete his journey safely in any other way than by following behind his guide [...]. He who follows will not turn aside from the right way if he always keeps the back of his leader in view.<sup>55</sup>

To see the 'back' of God, for St Gregory, signified a desire to allow oneself to be led by God so that the direction of one's ascent would in fact tend towards God. On the contrary, to see God face to face would imply being on an opposite course antithetical to that of God. St Gregory explained that it was for this reason that the Scriptures affirmed that seeing God face to face led to death, namely to a life contrary to that of God's, which is death. Yet, for St Gregory, precisely this encounter, characterised by following, led the faithful person to the realisation that God transcends all knowledge, that God is "infinite, enclosed by no boundary [ἀόριστον, οὐδενὶ περιειργόμενον πέρατι]"<sup>56</sup> and thus "no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the Good can be found."<sup>57</sup> On this Mateo-Seco importantly emphasised that, "this does not mean that one cannot reach virtue, but that one can always grow in it."<sup>58</sup> Being infinite, one's encounter with God was seen by St Gregory to be one characterised by everlasting progress where each step towards God would be experienced both as a fulfilment and a new beginning.

Contrary to the predominant thought of his time which saw perfection in terms of *stabilitas loci*, St Gregory's vision was quite the opposite; one which understood the mystical experience as one ceaseless and intensified longing to glimpse yet another aspect of the Supreme Good – the Supreme Good being Christ.<sup>59</sup> Quite paradoxically, it was

only in one's constant movement towards the Good that one became more steadfast and immovable in Christ. Far from stopping in his spiritual ascent when he had reached the summit of the mountain and encountered God in the darkness, Moses, according to St Gregory, saw this climax as a new beginning. Indeed he conceived perfection in terms of constant growth in goodness (πρόοδον πρὸς τὸ καλόν). He wrote:

For this reason we also say that the great Moses, as he was becoming ever greater, at no time stopped in his ascent, nor did he set a limit for himself in his upward course [μηδ' αὐτῷ ἵστασθαι τῆς ἀνόδου, μηδέ τινα ὄρον ἑαυτῷ ποιῆσθαι τῆς ἐπὶ τὸ ἄνω φορᾶς]. Once having set foot on the ladder which God set up [...] he continually climbed to the step above and never ceased to rise higher.<sup>60</sup>

St Gregory introduced this important theme of constant or ceaseless growth in God at the very beginning of his treatise – thereby highlighting its importance – when he wrote in the prologue that “the one limit of virtue is the absence of a limit.”<sup>61</sup> God's boundlessness implied for St Gregory that discipleship – namely, following God – would continue even in the eschatological age. As knowledge of God would grow, so too would the desire leading a person endlessly to pursue God and forever discover new aspects of his boundlessness. Indeed, the quintessential meaning of perfection, for St Gregory, is that a faithful person will never reach perfection since the insatiable or unquenchable desire for God was understood to be the very fulfilment of that desire. Accordingly, a further paradox is noted in the treatise where constant movement is to have reached stability in God. According to St Gregory, “this truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him”<sup>62</sup> and in so doing constantly transform by ascending from “glory to glory.”<sup>63</sup> It is God's infinite nature that occasioned on the part of the aspirant an endless ‘stretching out’ into all eternity. Consequently, St Gregory's exposition of the Christian life is important for today in that it is a striking reminder of the interminability and inexhaustibility of the mystical experience on the part of God and the necessary insatiable desire on the part of the seeker.<sup>64</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the paper, an argument was mounted that St Gregory, whilst a most significant proponent of the darkness symbolism to express his vision of humanity's union with God, must also be seen as an exponent of a mysticism of light. In so doing we were able to discern that his groundbreaking vision of the Christian life in terms of "dazzling darkness", far from being radically negative, was indeed a wonderful synthesis of both cataphatic and apophatic elements, essentially depicting God's union and presence amongst his people. In so doing, we were able to give consideration to those conclusions of modern scholarship which have seen St Gregory exclusively either as a mystic of darkness or one of light. Ultimately, for the Nyssen, we saw that there was a mutual reciprocity between the cataphatic and apophatic elements of his vision of God; a vision by which the darkness became partially known through the light, and at the same time the light better understood through darkness. In this way, darkness was not entirely unknown, but, equally importantly, nor was light an entirely exhaustive experience of God, since even the light was described as finding its origins in God's absolute transcendence. Indeed, the paper brought to light that at the height of his encounter with God, Moses is said to have experienced God in terms of darkness but it was a darkness overflowing with an excess of divine light. More particularly, at the heart of our study of the saint's mystical or theophanic theology, we were able to examine: firstly, the thoroughly Christocentric framework within which the work is best understood. In so doing, the soteriological and existential dimensions of the work were highlighted. Secondly, our examination of the three moments of the Christian life beginning with light and moving to increasing luminous darkness, demonstrated the real possibility of a vision of God, indeed one whose journey was shown to be unending since God is inexhaustible. We came to see that the entire work was predicated upon this epectatic or ascensional character of the Christian life. Indeed, we saw that St Gregory's understanding of perfection was its boundless characteristic. Finally, in this quest, the aspiring person was seen to have been granted a vision of God, but where such knowledge was ultimately only to be understood from within the context of love. And so, finally, we end this study with the following pertinent words of St Gregory:

As the soul then is raised up by these divine elevations, she sees within herself the sweet dart of love that has wounded her, and she glories in the wound: *I am wounded with love.*<sup>65</sup>

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to Revd Doru Costache – a friend and colleague – and to the referees for taking the time to review the paper and to offer important comments and suggestions for its improvement.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 80: “As a speculative theologian he was certainly the greatest of the three, though inferior to the other two in rhetorical skill and organizing ability.”

<sup>2</sup> Even though the phrase ‘mystical theology’ does not fair significantly – if at all – in the writings of St Gregory of Nyssa, it has been employed in this paper because of its established meaning today in Eastern Orthodox theology as a term expressing the existential and salvific aspects of all its doctrines. Accordingly, this paper’s examination of the ‘mystical theology’ of St Gregory will want to bring to the fore the Nyssen’s unique approach to encountering and experiencing God. In highlighting this existential character of mystical theology, Louth wrote: “mystical theology provides the context for direct apprehensions of the God who has revealed himself in Christ and dwells within us through the Holy Spirit.” A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, xi. In his classic study on mystical theology, Vladimir Lossky noted: “the eastern tradition has never made a sharp distinction between mysticism and theology; between personal experience of the divine mysteries and the dogma affirmed by the church [...], theology and mysticism support and complete each other.” Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 8. Most importantly Lossky also distinguished between mysticism which he defined in terms of autobiographical accounts of personal experiences with the divine and mystical theology, by which he understood reflections arising as a result of an experience with God manifesting themselves as “wisdom, understanding of the divine mysteries, expressing [themselves] in theological or moral teaching or in advice for the edification of one’s brethren.” V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology*, 20

- <sup>3</sup> Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Text and Commentary*, trans. T. Berkley (New York: New City, 1993), 236.
- <sup>4</sup> Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge and Divine Presence*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 175.
- <sup>5</sup> Ann Conway-Jones, 'The Garments of Heaven: Gregory of Nyssa's Interpretation of the Priestly Robe (*Life of Moses* 2,189-191) Seen in the Light of Heavenly Ascent Texts,' *Studia Patristica* 50 (2011): 207-215.
- <sup>6</sup> Martin Laird's important chapter titled 'The Luminous Darkness Revisited' in his work *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith*, 175-204. Even though the theme of darkness is not disregarded, there is definitely a tendency to downplay the darkness texts and in their stead to bring to the fore St Gregory's 'light' texts.
- <sup>7</sup> It was Henri-Charles Puech who first put forward the idea of St Gregory as a mystic of darkness. Henri-Charles Puech, 'La ténèbre mystique chez le Pseudo-Denys l'Aréopagite et dans la tradition patristique,' in *Etude Quête de la Gnose*, Vol. 1 (Paris, 1978), 119-41.
- <sup>8</sup> The complete title of this work as it appears in *Patrologia Graeca* vol. 44 is: The Life of Moses: Perfection in Virtue [Περὶ τοῦ βίου Μωσέως· ἢ περὶ τῆς κατ' ἀρετὴν τελειότητος].
- <sup>9</sup> In the opening prologue of his treatise *The Life of Moses*, St Gregory himself alluded to his old age. *The Life of Moses*, 1.2 (PG 44, 300B). Unless otherwise stated, the English translation is taken from, Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).
- <sup>10</sup> Cf. George Bebis, 'Gregory of Nyssa's "*De Vita Moysis*": A Philosophical and Theological Analysis,' *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 12:3 (1967), 373: "One might say *De Vita Moysis* is the recapitulation of Gregory's religious experience, the crystallization of his theological insights."
- <sup>11</sup> The significance of this treatise cannot be reduced to its contribution to mystical theology; it is important also as an example of patristic biblical exegesis and the relationship between theology and the academic disciplines in general.
- <sup>12</sup> Cf. Malherbe and Ferguson's introduction to the translation of *The Life of Moses*, 11.
- <sup>13</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.252 (PG 44, 409).

- <sup>14</sup> Cf. Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 68: "The figure of Moses exercises a great influence on the Jewish and Christian imagination. Philo composed two treatises about Moses [...]. Further evidence of the popularity of Moses in the early Church is provided by the conviction voiced by Justin that he was the first of the prophets (*I Apology* 32:1); and in the same writer we find the extraordinary claim that Plato derived his views on morality and on the structure and making of the universe from Moses. Origen, too, had delivered thirteen *Homilies on Exodus*, which [...] served further to highlight the figure and career of Moses.
- <sup>15</sup> That such a reading of the Scriptures for personal inspiration is methodologically sound is seen in 2Tim 3:16: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness." From a hermeneutical perspective, such an approach was ultimately justified for St Gregory because Moses was a 'type' foreshadowing Christ himself. It is for this reason that St Gregory could interpret Moses' rod changing into a snake "to signify in a figure the mystery of the Lord's incarnation, a manifestation of deity to men which effects the death of the tyrant and set free those under his power." *Life of Moses*, 2.27 (PG 44, 333C).
- <sup>16</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.216: "But again the true Lawgiver, of whom Moses was a type, cut the tables of human nature for himself from the earth [Ἀλλὰ πάλιν ὁ ἀληθινὸς νομοθέτης, οὗ τύπος ἦν ὁ Μωϋσῆς, ἐκ τῆς γῆς ἡμῶν ἑαυτῷ τὰς τῆς φύσεως πλάκας ἐλάξευσεν]" (PG 44, 398B).
- <sup>17</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.217 (PG 44, 398CD).
- <sup>18</sup> Such typology can readily be found throughout the entire treatise. Only one such other example is the scene where St Gregory described Moses' removal of the plagues and in so doing clearly connected Moses' outstretched hands with those of the crucified Christ: "When Moses stretched forth his hands on the Egyptians' behalf, the frogs were instantly destroyed [...]. You understand, surely, what the figures says to you, and perceive in the lawgiver the true Lawgiver and in his outstretched hands him who stretched forth his hands upon the cross." *Life of Moses* 2.78 (PG 44, 348D).
- <sup>19</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. M. Sebane (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 15. Hence, St Gregory's description of the soul's ascent towards God ought not be seen as Neoplatonic. Besides Exodus 19 depicts Moses in terms of *anabasis*, more particularly his ascent into the mountain of God. The biblical pericope also speaks of God's *katabasis*. In light of this Meredith is correct in pointing out that if emphasis is given to St Gregory's treatments of the Lord's *katabasis*, namely his emphasis on the Incarnation, then any suspicion of Platonist motives and influences in *The Life of Moses* are highly questionable. A. Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, 71-78.

- <sup>20</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.319 (PG 44, 429B).
- <sup>21</sup> *Life of Moses* 1.15 (PG 44, 304C).
- <sup>22</sup> Homily 11 in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* also clearly presents the Christian life in terms of a progression from light to increasing darkness. Cf. PG 44, 993D-1013C.
- <sup>23</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.1 (PG 44, 328).
- <sup>24</sup> It must be noted that the three stages of the Christian life under discussion ought not be seen in strictly successive terms where the first stage gives way to the second. It is for this reason that Louth correctly called these stages ‘moments.’ Cf. A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 82: “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.” Also, Everett Fergusson and Abraham J. Malherbe, ‘Introduction’ to Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 13: “The stages of Moses’ life are a pattern not so much in their order as in their constant going on to new things.”
- <sup>25</sup> In drawing parallels and contrasts to Plato, Louth interestingly suggested that St Gregory’s description of the mystical ascent from light to darkness was an intentional overturning of Plato’s cave. Cf. Andrew Louth, ‘The Cappadocians,’ in *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright and Edward Yarnold (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 167.
- <sup>26</sup> *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Homily 11 (PG 44, 1000C).
- <sup>27</sup> Cf. Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 97-110.
- <sup>28</sup> St Gregory was clear in stating that the beginning of one’s ascent towards God takes place in freely choosing to do good. On this he wrote: “We are in some manner our own parents, giving birth to ourselves by our own free choice in accordance with whatever we wish to be.” *Life of Moses* 2.3 (PG 44, 328B). It is important to note here, however, that even though not explicitly stated, the presumption is that even this free choice towards good is accompanied by divine grace, since it is a clear teaching of the Eastern Orthodox tradition that grace presupposes nature and not the reverse. Cf. Archbishop Stylianos (Harkianakis), ‘Nature and Grace in the Liturgical Conscience of Orthodoxy,’ *Phronema* 6 (1991): 5-19.
- <sup>29</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.162 (PG 44, 376D).
- <sup>30</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.22 (PG 44, 332D).

<sup>31</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.20 (PG 44, 332C).

<sup>32</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.21 (PG 44, 332D).

<sup>33</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.26 (PG 44, 333C).

<sup>34</sup> St Gregory further noted that not only this initial stage of the journey towards God but indeed all subsequent stages had to be motivated by love and not by fear or the hope of a reward. On this he explicitly wrote in his summary at the end of the treatise under examination: “This is true perfection: not to avoid a wicked life because like slaves we servilely fear punishment, nor to do good because we hope for rewards, as if cashing in on the virtuous life by some business-like and contractual arrangement. On the contrary, disregarding all those things for which we hope and which have been reserved by promise, we regard falling from God’s friendship as the only thing dreadful and we consider becoming God’s friend the only thing worthy of honor and desire. This, as I have said, is the perfection of life.” *Life of Moses* 2.320 (PG 44, 429CD).

<sup>35</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.31-33 (PG 44, 336BC).

<sup>36</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.30 (PG 44, 336A).

<sup>37</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.158 (PG 44, 373D-375A).

<sup>38</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.132 (PG 44, 365B).

<sup>39</sup> For St Gregory, a further symbolism of the burning bush, beyond its signification as the first stage of the Christian life, is that of the Virgin Mary, who giving birth to the Son of God remained incorruptible. Cf. *Life of Moses* 2.20-21: “Lest one think that the radiance did not come from a material substance, this light did not shine from some luminary among the stars, but came from an earthly bush and surpassed the heavenly luminaries in brilliance. From this we learn also the mystery of the Virgin: the light of divinity which through birth shone from her into human life did not consume the burning bush, even as the flower of her virginity was not withered by giving birth” (PG 44, 332D).

<sup>40</sup> Meredith, *The Cappadocians*, 72.

<sup>41</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.118 (PG 44, 361A).

<sup>42</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.153 (PG 44, 373AB).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. also St Gregory’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 11: “Our initial withdrawal from wrong and erroneous ideas God is a transition from darkness to light. Next comes a closer awareness of hidden things, and by this the soul is guided through sense phenomena to the world of the invisible. And this

- awareness is a kind of cloud, which over-shadows all appearances, and slowly guides and accustoms the soul to look towards what is hidden” (PG 44, 1000D).
- 44 Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, ‘Epektasis,’ in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero, trans. Seth Cherny (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 265.
- 45 *Life of Moses*, 2.156-157 (PG 44, 373CD).
- 46 It is necessary to highlight the different levels of St Gregory’s interpretation of the theme of darkness. Whilst this paper outlines his use of the symbol to signify humanity’s encounter with God, namely as a positive symbol, this metaphor is also used in a pejorative sense implying the darkness of sin or ignorance. Cf. *Life of Moses* 2.80-81: “In a similar manner, the enlightened life is proposed to all equally, according to their ability. Some continue on in darkness, driven by their evil pursuits to the darkness of wickedness, while others are made radiant by the light of virtue” (PG 44, 349B). Laird correctly underscored that St Gregory’s use of the symbol of darkness was often driven by his exegetical concerns of specific Scriptural texts. M. Laird, ‘Darkness,’ in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero, trans. Seth Cherny (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 203-205.
- 47 For a brief yet insightful introduction into modern divisive sensibilities refer to Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 1-16.
- 48 *Life of Moses* 2.162-164 (PG 44: 376C-377B).
- 49 This basic antinomy between the invisibility and incomprehensibility of God on the one hand and his visibility is found in the Scriptures. Cf. the first letter of St John which reads: “we shall see him as he is” (1Jn 3:2) followed in the next chapter of that same letter by the claim that “no one has seen God at any time.” (1Jn 4:12).
- 50 Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), 52.
- 51 *Life of Moses* 2.170,174 (PG 44, 380B, 381AB).
- 52 For an insightful study on St Gregory’s understanding of *epektasis*, see: Kristina Robb-Dover, ‘Gregory of Nyssa’s ‘Perpetual Progress,’’ *Theology Today* 65 (2008): 213-235, and Everett Fergusson, ‘God’s Infinity and Man’s Mutability: Perpetual Progress according to Gregory of Nyssa,’ *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 18:1-2 (1983): 59-78.

- <sup>53</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.232 (PG 44, 401D).
- <sup>54</sup> Cf. *Life of Moses* 2.221: “Front and back pertain only to those things which are observed to have shape. Every shape provides the limits of a body. So then he who conceives of God in some shape will not realize that he is free of a bodily nature” (PG 44, 399A).
- <sup>55</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.251-252 (PG 44, 409A).
- <sup>56</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.236 (PG 44, 404C).
- <sup>57</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.239 (PG 44, 404D).
- <sup>58</sup> Mateo-Seco, ‘Epektasis,’ 266.
- <sup>59</sup> Cf. *Life of Moses* 2.248: “For since Christ is understood by Paul as the rock, all hope of good things is believed to be in Christ, in whom we have learned all the treasures of good things to be. He who finds any good finds it in Christ who contains all good” (PG 44, 408B).
- <sup>60</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.227 (PG 44, 401B).
- <sup>61</sup> *Life of Moses* 1.8 (PG 44, 301B).
- <sup>62</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.239 (PG 44, 404D).
- <sup>63</sup> *On Perfection*, PG 46, 285BC.
- <sup>64</sup> Far from creating a cold distance or isolation on God’s part, the boundlessness of God, for St Gregory, was a sign of his greatest benefaction and immeasurable love for the world in that it showed that the gifts bestowed in this life and beyond will never be exhausted and will forever happily surprise those seeking him. In the end, the image of “dazzling darkness” understood as God’s incomprehensibility and presence at the same time, is best understood as a positive symbol of love. When all intellectual concepts have been left behind that which ultimately remains is love. Very often the word used to describe not only God’s love for the world but also the seeker’s loving response in the treatise, is *eros* precisely to emphasize the intensity of the experience. Accordingly, in his section on ‘eternal progress,’ St Gregory wrote: “such an experience seems to me to belong to the soul which loves what is beautiful. Hope always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond, always kindles the desire for the hidden through what is constantly perceived. Therefore, the ardent lover of beauty [σφοδρὸν ἐραστήν τοῦ κάλλους], although receiving what is always visible as an image of what he desires, yet longs to be filled with the very stamp of the archetype.” *The Life of Moses* 2.231 (PG 44, 401D). The very satisfaction of the seeker’s love for God is that it remains unsatisfied.

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<sup>65</sup> *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. PG 44, 852A-853A.

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