

## Gregory of Nyssa (330–395)

### *The Life of Moses (c. 390)*

It presents Moses as a model of Christian perfection. Why Moses? (1) He was called a friend of God. (2) He's a worthy example because he was willing to suffer death with his fellow Israelites. (3) His intercession worked, thereby confirming him as a model of perfection to be emulated.

It consists of two books. In the first, he describes the various episodes in Moses' life. In the second, he interprets these episodes, as they correspond to the various stages that Christians must travel in order to reach spiritual perfection.

Gregory divides Moses' progress into three stages, in which God manifests Himself to Moses: (1) light (the burning bush); (2) clouds (the mountain); and (3) darkness.

With the third stage, Moses understands that God's infinity transcends all that can be known of Him. Coming near to God means entering darkness.

It goes always toward the more inward, until the activity of the intellect arrives at the invisible and the incomprehensible and there it sees God. For the true knowledge and seeing of what we seek consist in this, *in not seeing*, because that which we seek transcends all knowledge, cut off, as it were, on every side by incomprehensibility, as by a thick cloud.

Based on Ex. 33:11, 22–23, Gregory develops two central themes:

The first is principle of eternal progress in God. The perfect person is the one who continually grows in his knowledge of God. Knowledge of God is such that when the faithful experience God in His infinity, they experience the paradox of deep satisfaction in God's presence, and yet, at the same time, they experience God's absence because God remains constantly beyond human understanding.

The second is the principle of *skopos* (end or goal). The spiritual life is viewed as a ladder on which we climb to perfection. He describes how this meeting with God occurs "in the cloud" – without the help of created vision, since God is totally invisible and incomprehensible to the created eye, and inaccessible to the created mind. By ascetic purification, effort, and virtue, we're enabled to acquire "spiritual senses," which allow us to perceive the One who is beyond creation.

## Dionysius the Areopagite

The author is unknown. He adopted the persona of the Athenian convert mentioned in Acts 17:22–34, to lend apostolic authority to his work. He lived in the late fifth century.

*Mystic Theology*

*Divine Names*

*Letters*

All reality springs from the Trinity, producing the celestial hierarchy and the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Each of these is triadic and descends orderly from God.

The first level consists of:

- seraphim, cherubim, thrones
- dominations, powers, authorities
- principalities, archangels, angels

The second order consists of:

- mysteries of the church: baptism, eucharist, chrismation (east) or confirmation (west)
- those who administer the mysteries: bishops, priests, deacons
- those who receive the mysteries: monks, laity, uninitiated

At the center of his system is procession whereby the soul ascends (returns) to the divine presence, which is manifested through the created hierarchies

This process involves “an assimilation to likeness with God” (*theosis*).

It’s achieved through a threefold way:

- (1) Purgation: the rigorous application of ascetical disciplines – cutting off all that hinders the journey toward God
- (2) Illumination: God’s gift which enables mystical insight into essential Christian truths
- (3) Union: participative knowledge of God – “unknowing knowing”

He offers positive statements about God, yet he continually reminds the reader that none of these thoughts can reach Him who is unknowable. God isn’t an object of knowledge.

God is made manifest only to those ... who pass beyond the summit of every holy ascent, who leave behind them every divine light, every voice, every word from heaven, and who plunge into the darkness where, as scripture proclaims, there dwells the One who is beyond all things ... Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing.”

This is ecstasy – the soul “going out” of itself and uniting to God. The soul experiences God as God gives Himself in the communication of divine love.