

# Mystical Theology

Gregory of Nyssa

Kenneth Alonso, MD, PhD



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- 335-395 AD.
- Married. Teacher of rhetoric; retired to his brother's monastery. Named bishop by his brother (Basil the Great) in 372.
- One of the great Cappadocian fathers, a light of the Second Ecumenical Council (Constantinople, 381 AD) that accepted his teaching on the Trinity.
- The Father of the Fathers

- Spiritual senses are distinct from all other forms of created perception, and make God accessible to man.
- The meeting with God occurs “in the cloud” (without the help of created vision) as God is totally invisible and incomprehensible to the created eye, and inaccessible to the created mind.
- God is seen and perceived by man, when man, by baptismal and ascetic purification, by effort and virtues, acquires “spiritual senses” which allow him to perceive through communion in Christ and the Holy Spirit, the One who is beyond creation.

- Exodus (and Numbers) is a parable of Christian spiritual ascent.
- The God who is perceived by Moses is the God of Israel, the totally Other, the living and personal God, not a philosophical idea.
- God is infinite. It is impossible to exhaust Him or to comprehend Him as the human mind comprehends a concept.
- Communion with God is a constant ascent “from glory to glory.” Each step of this ascent includes the joy of further expectation, the knowledge that He always remains greater than anything we can know of Him, and also that He gives Himself to man without setting any limits, because of His own inexhaustibility.

- In meeting God there is never frustration or satiety, but only the discovery of true love.
- “There are certain things from profane education which should not be rejected” in striving for virtue...Such things as moral and natural philosophy, geometry, astronomy, dialectic...will be useful when in time the divine sanctuary of mystery must be beautified with the riches of reason.”

- What is unnecessary, superfluous, or out of place in a revealed law...where something morally wrong is enjoined in a biblical text, an allegorical meaning must be sought...Further, anything that in its literal sense is unworthy of God points to an inner meaning.
- Asceticism is a “greater philosophy” than is profane learning. Control of the passions is paramount.

- “For he who has truly come to be in the image of God and who has in no way turned aside from the divine character bears in himself its distinguishing marks and shows in all things his conformity of the archetype; he beautifies his own soul with what is incorruptible, unchangeable, and shares in no evil at all.”
- Man was made in the image of God. By his fall into sin, this image was tarnished. Christ took upon Himself our nature in order to restore to us our original nature.



- Conversion restores man's capacity to reflect the divine nature. There is an incessant transformation into the likeness of God as man stretches out with the divine infinity; there is an ever-greater participation in God.
- “How then would one arrive at the (boundary of) perfection when he can find no boundary?...The one limit of perfection is that it has no limit...The perfection of human nature consists...in its very growth in goodness.”

- “Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the good can be found nor is the increasing of desire for the good brought to an end because it is satisfied.”
- “Activity directed toward virtue causes its capacity to grow through exertion.” Participation in virtue dilates the capacity for more virtue.
- “The continual development of life to what is better is the soul’s way to perfection.” (cf Phil 3:13)

**Nicolas Froment,**  
The Burning Bush

Wood,  
Cathedrale Saint  
Sauveur, Aix-en-  
Provence

<http://www.wga.hu>



- “The birth that distresses the tyrant is the beginning of the virtuous life.”
- “Moses teaches us by his own example to take our stand with virtue as with a kinsman and to slay virtue’s adversary.”
- “If...we by ourselves are too weak to give the victory to what is righteous...we must flee as quickly as possible...from the conflict to the greater and higher teaching of the mysteries.”
- “If we must again...associate with profane wisdom...let us reprove the teachers of evil for their wicked use of instruction.”

- “For if truth is God and truth is light – the Gospel testifies by these sublime and divine names to the God who made Himself visible to us in the flesh – such guidance of virtue leads us to know that light which has reached down even to human nature...The radiance did not come from a material substance.”
- “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.”

- “That light teaches us what we must do to stand within the rays of the true light: Sandaled feet cannot ascend the height where the light of truth is seen, but the dead and earthly covering of skins, which was placed around our nature at the beginning when we were found naked because of disobedience to the divine will, must be removed from the feet of the soul. When we do this, the knowledge of the truth will result and manifest itself. The full knowledge of being comes about by purifying our opinion concerning nonbeing.”

- “At the time the great Moses was instructed in the theophany, he came to know that none of those things which are apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by the understanding really subsists, but that the transcendent essence and cause of the universe, on which everything depends, alone subsists.”
- “For even if the understanding looks upon any other existing things, reason observes in absolutely none of them the self-sufficiency by which they could exist without participating in true Being.”

- “In the same way that Moses on that occasion attained to this knowledge, so now does everyone who, like him, divests himself of the earthly covering and looks to the light shining from the bramble bush...the Radiance which shines upon us through this thorny flesh and which is...the true light and truth itself. A person like this becomes able to help others to salvation, to destroy the tyranny which holds power wickedly, and to deliver to freedom everyone held in evil servitude.”



- “The transformation of the right hand and the rod’s changing into a snake became the first of the miracles...in a figure, the mystery of the Lord’s incarnation...”
- ”’The only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father’ (Jo 1:18) is ‘He who is the right hand of the Most High’” (Ps 76:11).
- “Although the divine nature is contemplated in its immutability, by condescension to the weakness of our human nature it was changed to our shape and form.”

- “‘And the Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert’ (Jo 3:14)...the Lord was ‘made sin for our sake’ (2 Cor 5:21) by being invested with our sinful nature...that he might devour” sin.
- When “sinners are brought to their senses...the “rod of faith” supports them.
- “He who has some insight into these things right away becomes a god to those who resist the truth, who have been distracted to a material and unsubstantial delusion.”

- The foreign wife (profane education) will follow him. When “doctrines... contaminated by profane philosophy’s absurd additions...are completely removed, the angel of God comes to us in mercy.”
- “For the one who has been lifted to the greatest virtue of soul by long training and supernatural illumination on the mountain...then his brother (ie., guardian angel) brings him assistance and joins him...and stands by...whenever” Pharoah is approached. (cf Prov 17:17)

- “He who has not equipped himself...by spiritual training to instruct the multitude must not presume to speak among the people...”
- “The enemy was provoked...this demon who does men harm and corrupts them is intensely concerned that his subjects not look to Heaven but that they stoop to Earth and make bricks within themselves out of the clay...the chaff...(is) material for the fire.” (Mt 3:12; 1 Cor 3:12)
- “He abandoned them to shameful passions.” (Rom 1:28)

- “Your stubborn refusal to repent is only adding to the anger God will have toward you on that day of anger when His just judgments will be made known. He will repay each one as his works deserve.” (Rom 2:5)
- “When through virtue one comes to grips with any evil, he must completely destroy the first beginnings of evil.” (“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body cast into Gehenna.” (Mt 5:29)

- “Scripture requires that the body of the Lamb, whose blood was displayed on the doors and separated the people from the destroyer of the firstborn, become our food.”
- “The demeanor of those eating this food was to be intense and earnest...it commands us explicitly to recognize that our present life is transient...(directed) towards our departure.”
- In the crossing the cloud served as guide...”the grace of the Holy Spirit, who guides toward the Good those who are worthy...”

- “Whoever follows Him passes through the water, since the guide makes a way through it for him. In this way he is safely led to freedom, and the one who pursues him to bring him into bondage is destroyed in the water.”
- “For who does not know the Egyptian army...are the various passions of the soul by which man is enslaved?”
- “The Law now commands us to eat unleavened bread at the Pasch... understand...that no remnant of evil should mix with the subsequent life.”

- “For to the one who has left behind... pleasures which he served before crossing the sea, life removed from these pleasures seems at first difficult and disagreeable. But...if one receives the mystery of the Resurrection which had its beginning with the 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.”
- “In the churches bless God the Lord, from the fountains of Israel.” (Ps 68:26)



- “He who left the Egyptian behind dead in the water, was sweetened by the wood, was delighted in the apostolic springs, and was refreshed by the shade of the palm trees, is already capable of receiving God. ‘For the rock...is Christ’ (1 Cor 10:4), who is...resistant to unbelievers...(but) becomes drink to those who are thirsty and flows into those who receive Him...I and my Father ‘shall come to him and make our home with him.’” (Jo 14:23)

- One should empty “the sack of his soul of all evil nourishment...In this way he receives in himself with his pure soul the food which comes down from above, which was not produced for us by any sowing in” earth...”This miracle teaches in anticipation the mystery of the Virgin.”
- “Everyone shared in the food equally...those making their living from material things should not exceed the bounds of need...”

- “For he who sows in the field of the Spirit will get from it a harvest of eternal life, but he who sows in the field of self-indulgence will get a harvest of corruption out of it.” (Gal 6:8)
- “For the true priesthood, through the word of God joined with it, lifts high again the powers of the Law...” signifying the cross.
- “Whoever has been purified...he it is who advances to the contemplation of the transcendent nature...washed from every stain...in order that he might appear pure to the One who sees what is hidden...”

- “That none of the irrational animals was allowed to appear on the mountain signifies that in the contemplation of the intelligibles we surpass the knowledge which originates with the senses.”
- “What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love Him.” (Isa 64:4; 1 Cor 2:9)
- “The knowledge of God is a mountain steep indeed and difficult to climb – the majority of people scarcely reach its base. If one were a Moses, he would ascend higher and hear the sound of trumpets... For the preaching of the divine nature is truly a trumpet blast, which strikes the hearing...”

- “Their voice goes out through all the Earth and their message to the ends of the world.” (Ps 18:5)
- “Scripture teaches by this that religious knowledge comes at first to those who receive it as light...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 what of the divine nature is uncontemplated.”

- “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 sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness.”

- “Moses learns at first the things which must be known about God (namely, that none of those things known by human comprehension is to be ascribed to Him). Then he is taught the other side of virtue, learning by what pursuits the virtuous life is perfected. After this he comes to the tabernacle not made with hands.”
- The tabernacle is “Christ who is the Power and the Wisdom of God.” (1 Cor 1:24)
- “For the Power which encompasses the universe, in which lives the fullness of divinity...who encompasses everything within Himself, is rightly called tabernacle.”

- “The Holy of Holies is not accessible to the multitude....For the truth of reality is truly a holy thing...and is incomprehensible and inaccessible to the multitude...the apprehension of the realities above comprehension should not be meddled with; one should rather believe that what is sought does exist, not that it lies visible to all, but that it remains in the secret and ineffable areas of the intelligence.”
- “He who has progressed this far...carries in his hand the tablets, written by God, which contain the divine Law.”



- The ornaments for the ears (the Law) is removed through disobedience and an idol is made with it...drunken songs are sung.
- “Whoever is for the Lord, let him come to me.” (Ex 32:26)
- “One kills...a brother by destroying sin, for everyone who destroys some evil that the Adversary has contrived in him kills in himself that one who lives through sin.”
- “Today you have been dedicated to the Lord, for you were against your own sons and kinsmen; to bring a blessing upon yourselves today.” (Ex 32:29)

- “The true Lawgiver...cut the tablets of human nature for Himself from our earth...He became the stonecutter of His own flesh, which was carved by the divine finger, for ‘the Holy Spirit came upon the virgin and the power of the Most High overshadowed her.’ (cf Dn 2:34, 45; Lk 1:35) When this took place, our nature regained its unbroken character, becoming immortal through the letters written by... the Holy Spirit.”

- “Moses was transformed to such a degree of glory that the mortal eye could not behold him...For in truth, as the Gospel says, ‘when He shall come in His glory escorted by all the angels,’ (Mt 25:31) he is scarcely...visible to the righteous...Let the impious be removed...’he shall not see the Glory of the Lord.” (Is 26:10)
- “He who thinks God is something to be known does not have life, because he has turned from true Being to what he considers by sense perception to have being...”

- “True being is inaccessible to knowledge...Thus, what Moses yearned for is satisfied by the very things which leave his desire unsatisfied...the Divine is...enclosed by no boundary...This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see Him.”
- “You must stand on the rock...(Ex 33:2;Sgs 2:14) who is Christ” (1 Cor 10:4).
- “Moses so refrained from becoming involved in (the weakness of the Israelites, their envy) that he even ministered to the condition of those who had become ill.”
- “Let your armor be the Lord Jesus.” (Rom 13:14)

- “What is the bunch of grapes suspended from the wood (that Joshua brought) but that bunch suspended from the wood in the last days, whose blood becomes a saving drink for those who believe? Moses spoke to us of this ahead of time when he said in a figure: ‘They drank the blood of the grape.’ (Dt 32:14) By this he signifies the saving passion.”
- The brazen serpent demonstrates that “although the evil of death which follows sins does not prevail against those who look to the cross, the lust of flesh against spirit has not completely ceased to exist.”

- ‘Every fall should equally be avoided as long as it is a fall.’
- “When I look at your fruit, I do not recognize the priestly tree by it.” (cf Lk 6:43)
- The fruit of the priest is self-control. It “does not mature from earthly moisture, but this kind of fruit has many streams...which flow...by which life’s fruit is brought to a state of ripeness.”
- “The eye is not dimmed nor does the person age” who follows the Royal road and is worthy to be called the servant of YHWH. There is no corruption in him.

# Bibliography

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