Gregory of Nyssa’s Sequence of Topographical Symbols as a Pattern of Spiritual Progress

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This study focuses on the exegesis of Gregory of Nyssa, a 4th century exegete, a Church Father, and one of the three Cappadocian Fathers. The main primary source of my thesis is Gregory’s treatise *The Life of Moses*, an intriguing example of Patristic exegesis based on the Exodus narrative. The main purpose of Gregory’s treatise is not to make a historical presentation of the journey of Moses and the Israelites, but to elevate the reader into a higher state of consciousness in order to perceive the spiritual meaning of the narrative. The kind of exegesis that Gregory applies is often defined as allegorical interpretation or allegorical exegesis, rich on symbols and enigmas, which was at first neglected in scholarly discussion. Fortunately, there has been a growing interest in Biblical interpretation of the Church Fathers since the mid-20th century.

The main objective of my thesis is to focus on Gregory’s interpretations of topographical imagery presented in the Exodus narrative. Gregory gives symbolical interpretations to topographical locations: the city, the river, the sea, the desert and the mountain. My intention is to show that Gregory was not thinking of the various symbolical interpretations as independent units but he was seeking for a logical coherent sequence.

One of the main objectives of modern research has been the reassessment of Gregory’s sources. In order to understand Gregory’s exegetical and philosophical concepts and terminology, one must be aware of the rich and profound tradition already established in classical antiquity. Gregory makes moral, ascetical, philosophical and mystical interpretations in relation to each topographical detail. These figurative interpretations are by no means based on his original ideas but are rooted in the rich tradition of Greek classical culture, as well as in the exegetical tradition of his Jewish and Christian predecessors. My purpose is to provide a systematic analysis of each term Gregory is applying and present an overall model of Gregory’s exegetical method.

The final aim of my thesis is to present an analysis of Gregory’s pattern of topographical symbols as a whole. Gregory connects the topographical details with his threefold pattern of illumination, purification and participation in a fascinating way. For Gregory, the exodus narrative is a journey of a soul being liberated from the bondage of passions, temptations and materialism towards an ever-increasing awareness of God’s presence.

**Keywords**

Gregory of Nyssa, early Christianity, patristics, allegory, mysticism, interpretation, exodus

**Place of storage**

Helsingin yliopiston kirjasto, Keskustakampuksen kirjasto, Teologia

**Other information**
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1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose of the Study, Sources and Previous Research

This study focuses on Gregory of Nyssa, one of the three Cappadocian Fathers, an influential 4th century exegete, Church Father, and mystic, and on his symbolical exegesis presented especially in his work *The Life of Moses*. In this chapter I will present the aim and the research question of my study, the sources and scholarly debate related to the topic.

This study concentrates on Gregory’s symbolical interpretations of topography presented in the Exodus narrative. As David Daube has noted, there has been a tendency in the history of Biblical interpretation of seeing the Exodus narrative as prototype or a mould “in which other stories of rescue from ruin may be cast”. The Exodus narrative has been seen as a pattern of deliverance of the soul from spiritual bondage to a deeper awareness of God. This scheme also applies to Gregory’s perception of the Exodus narrative.¹ In Gregory’s symbolical exegesis, geographical locations such as Egypt, the Red Sea, the desert and Mount Sinai, function as symbols of a pattern of an inner journey of a soul of a Christian from bondage to perfection in virtue. The aim of Gregory’s exegesis was to show that the followers of Christ also follow Moses through the narrative of Exodus, not through the actual geographical locations of the journey of Moses and the Israelites, but through a pattern of symbols that the locations and events of the narrative represent. Each topographical detail in Gregory’s model represent a waypoint on the spiritual and philosophical path of a Christian aiming for perfection. The concept applied by Gregory has been defined as allegorical interpretation or allegorical exegesis.

Patrick F. O’Connell has noted that in the previous research there has been a tendency to see the allegorical details of Moses’s journey in Gregory’s exegesis as an inconsistent and unorderly pattern of events. One approach has been that Gregory didn’t mean the pattern to be orderly but the treatise is more about “constantly going into new things”. O’Connell calls for another approach of taking Gregory’s pattern more seriously: perhaps the various details are meant to form an orderly sequence, a double pattern, as O’Connell suggests, and that the treatise should be considered as “a coherent whole with a carefully organised structure”. The aim of my study is to show that Gregory was not merely

interpreting geographical locations as independent scattered symbolic units, but he was indeed seeking for logical coherence between the details (chapter 4).

O’Connell has also rightly noted that most commentators are solely focused on Gregory’s theophany scenes. It seems that the scholars have focused more on Gregory’s mountain experience, since all the theophany scenes occur on a mountain, which is the central terrain in relation to Gregory’s mystical thought. It seems that the scholars had less interest in Gregory’s interpretations of the images of the lowlands, such as the city, the sea, the river, and the desert.2

My research question for my thesis is: How and for what purpose is Gregory of Nyssa using topography of the Exodus narrative as a pattern of symbols? After providing a brief biography of Gregory’s life (subchapter 1.2.), I will present the primary source of my study, Gregory of Nyssa’s The Life of Moses. Subsequently, I have a look on Gregory’s methods of interpretation as well as the terminology he uses in his exegesis (chapter 2), and then analyse systematically the details of Gregory’s symbolical pattern (chapter 3). Finally, I will examine the coherence of the pattern as a whole (chapter 4).

I would especially like to thank Pauli Annala for introducing me the world of spiritual topography as he calls the phenomenon,3 and Juliette Day and Joona Salminen for guiding me into a deeper analysis of the subject. Prof. Annala introduced me the most elaborate study on the subject, The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality by Belden C. Lane, who describes the phenomenon as inner geography. According to Lane, Gregory saw the desert and mountain experiences of Moses as a paradigm of three stages of growth in spiritual life. God’s revelation came to Moses first through light, then through a cloud, and finally through darkness. Lane sees Gregory’s pattern as a contrast to the light-centered kataphatic tradition.4 This is the classic threefold pattern that has been analysed by several scholars, and sets the focus of the research in mountain scenery.

Gregory of Nyssa has been for centuries the most neglected thinker of the three Cappadocians. He was seen as an unoriginal Platonist (the thesis of Harold

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Cherniss\textsuperscript{5}) and an Origenist who incorporated Hellenistic influences into Christian thought (the thesis of Adolf von Harnack\textsuperscript{6}). It was the movement of Nouvelle Théologie that arose in the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century, which brought the exegesis of the Fathers into the focus of scholarly discussion. A key figure in this movement was Henri de Lubac, who called for a thorough re-evaluation of Patristic and Medieval exegesis, in order to unravel the complex web of misunderstandings of previous historical research. For De Lubac, allegorical exegesis of the Fathers was central to the right understanding of the Scriptures from the point of view of salvation, mysticism, and the right moral conduct of life.\textsuperscript{7}

The debate about Gregory’s use of allegorical interpretation relates to a wider question: how did Hellenism impact Gregory’s thought? Was Gregory perhaps distorted by Greek influence (the view of T. F. Torrance), or did Gregory perhaps Hellenise Christianity (the view of Robert Jenson)? According to Arthur P. Urbano, these kind of views are based on Adolf von Harnack’s vision of Hellenization of Christianity; that the Fathers adopted influences from Hellenism that are distorting “classical Christian theology”. Allegory or symbolism have been seen by scholars following Harnack’s vision as a Hellenistic way of interpretation that has no place in classical Christian thought. According to Urbano, this kind of views, that Gregory was borrowing methods or philosophies that are alien to Christian though, misrecognizes the interrelationship between Christian, Jewish, and Greek intellectuals. We should rather see Gregory as another participant in the theological and philosophical debate of his time.\textsuperscript{8}

There has been a growing interest in Gregory’s thought since the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century. I see Walther Völker’s study \textit{Das Vollkommenseitsideal des Origenes}\textsuperscript{9} on Origen’s desert symbolism as an early example of a study of geographical symbolic patterns of the Fathers. Already in 1931, he saw Origen’s allegorical pattern based on the journey of the Israelites through the desert stations as a Christian model for attaining mystical union with God.\textsuperscript{10} Moreover, in 1955,

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\textsuperscript{7} David M. Williams, \textit{Receiving the Bible in Faith}, 130–131.
\textsuperscript{8} Arthur P. Urbano, \textit{The Philosophical Life}, 113.
\textsuperscript{9} Walther Völker, \textit{Das Vollkommenseitsideal des Origenes}, Tübingen 1931.
\textsuperscript{10} R. C. P. Hanson, \textit{Allegory and Event}, London 1959, 254–255.
\end{flushright}
Völker provided an elaborate study on Gregory, *Gregor von Nyssa als Mystiker*, seeing Gregory as a follower of the mystical thought of Origen.

It is important to notify that geographical symbolism is not only a Christian phenomenon. The geographical imagery of the Fathers is based on the rich soil of Greek and Jewish tradition, which is also a vast field that needs further investigation. There is a rich spectrum of images related to the mountains and the oceans that is already present in the mythology of the Homeric literature, which have inspired philosophers to make interpretations based on them. The Jewish tradition, however, brought the desert imagery into the center of geographical symbolism, which was adopted by Christian interpreters. My task on this study is to plunge deep into this wide web of ancient symbolical associations and interpretations (chapter 2), and provide a systematic analysis on this complicated reception history of symbols and allegories (chapters 3 and 4). The task is challenging, since interpreters are not keen on copying details of earlier interpretations, but each interpreter uses the bulk of symbolic images in a personal way, often altering the meaning or the purpose of the symbol presented by his predecessors.

As Luc Brisson has shown in his research, already the Greek philosophers were using symbolical techniques in the interpretation of Homeric literature. The same question could be asked in relation to Christianity and the position of the Old Testament: How did Christians manage to “save” the Jewish writings so that they would not be neglected or discarded in the manner of Marcion? According to Edwin Hatch, it was the allegorical method of interpretation that “largely helped to prevent the Old Testament from being discarded.” Gregory, with his exegesis on the Pentateuch, managed to transform the experience of Moses and the Israelites through different types of terrain to an inner experience of a Christian on his spiritual path with the use of allegorical interpretation. He wasn’t the inventor of his method but was relying on the earlier tradition of Jewish, and Christian allegorical interpretation, and on the methods of Greek philosophical tradition. My intention is to seek Gregory’s possible sources of the

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14 About Marcion see pp. 37–38.
philosophical content of Gregory’s interpretations of the Bible. There has been scholarly debate on how Gregory relied on Greek paideia, the curriculum of Greek philosophy, literature, and rhetoric. Worth mentioning here is Werner Jaeger’s work on the topic, as well as the work of David L. Balás, H. B Drobner and Jaroslav Pelikan. The study focuses in Gregory’s use of philosophy since his interpretations of Biblical passages – his theoria – often include philosophical arguments. An important research in this respect is Arthur P. Urbano’s The Philosophical Life, which does not merely concentrate on Christian philosophy of the Church Fathers, but sees the Church Fathers as participants in the philosophical debate among Greek, Jewish, and Christian philosophers.

By far the most elaborate study on the origins of Gregory’s symbolic exegesis in The Life of Moses is Albert C. Geljon’s Philonic Exegesis in Gregory of Nyssa’s De vita Moysis. Geljon comes to the conclusion that Gregory’s exegesis in The Life of Moses is highly influenced by Philo, a 1st century Jewish exegete. Geljon also discusses how Platonic and Stoic philosophy had an influence on Gregory’s thought. Geljon’s work is concentrated on various details in Gregory’s symbolical exegesis and serves as a great tool in this respect; however, going through the excess amount of Gregory’s symbolical images, it is important to get a grip on Gregory’s symbolical pattern as a whole. Geljon focuses on all of Gregory’s symbols presented in The Life of Moses. My emphasis on this study will be mainly on Gregory’s geographical symbols.

Gregory’s allegorical images have been seen as key elements in connection with his mystical thought. I see Gregory’s light and darkness imagery in connection with his mountain experience as allegorical details in his pattern of inner geography. Since the end of the 1930’s, there has been growing interest towards Gregory’s mysticism. It was Henri-Charles Puech (1902–1986) who saw Gregory as a central thinker considering the topic of mystical darkness. Jean

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21 Albert C. Geljon, Philonic Exegesis in Gregory of Nyssa’s De Vita Moysis, Providence, RI 2002.
Daniélou (1905–1974), another key figure of Nouvelle Théologie, made further research on the subject, naming Gregory as the founder of mystical theology. This claim was challenged by Walther Völker and Henri Crouzel (1918–2003), who saw the influence of Origen’s darkness imagery in Gregory’s thought. Daniélou, therefore, would be downplaying Origen’s importance as the founder of Christian mystical theology.22 Albert C. Geljon has further noted that the image of darkness appears already in Philo’s exegesis on Ex. 20:21, which was later taken over by Clement of Alexandria.23 Therefore, the importance of Clement and Philo should also not be underestimated in the development of Christian mystical thought. However, Gregory’s importance lies in his influence on Pseudo-Dionysius’s theology of mystical darkness, which made the darkness imagery known in medieval West.24 The topic of mystical darkness has been one of the most discussed topics in relation to Gregory’s theological thought. I will revisit the subject in subchapter 4.6.

As already noted before, Gregory’s interpretation of geographical symbols relies on the earlier tradition of allegorical exegesis by Philo and Origen. This having said, Gregory was not a mere copyist but read his sources with a critical eye and formed a method of exegesis that also had its personal traits and differences in comparison with his predecessors. He adopted the method of allegorical exegesis from Origen, but “rejected his excesses” as Daniélou has expressed it.25 Gregory also had his opponents to his allegorical approach; The Antiochene tradition of exegesis emerged as a direct counterreaction to the Philonic-Origenian tradition.26 In this 4th century debate Gregory acted as a defender of allegorical exegesis, as shown in the prologue of Gregory’s *Commentary of the Song of Songs*. Ronald Heine has shown in his article how Gregory’s apology of allegory is indebted to Origen and Paul.27 I will discuss the subject further in subchapter 2.8.

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A more recent example of research focused on Gregory’s symbols is Ann Conway-Jones’s thorough study on Gregory’s tabernacle imagery,\textsuperscript{28} which is also related to the study of symbolical interpretation of topography, since Moses received his revelation of the tabernacle on Mount Sinai. Also worth mentioning is Anders-Christian Jacobsen’s essay ‘Allegorical Interpretation of Geography in Origen’s Homilies on the Book of Joshua’,\textsuperscript{29} which presents a more recent study on Origen’s exegesis with a topographical focus, as well as Claudia Rapp’s work on desert, countryside, and city imagery of the early Christians.\textsuperscript{30} However, I have not yet found a research that has its main focus on Gregory’s allegorical exegesis from a topographical point of view. Therefore, I believe that the topic certainly deserves more focused attention.

1.2. Bios – Biography and works of Gregory of Nyssa
Gregory of Nyssa, the youngest of the three Cappadocian fathers, was born c. 335. Gregory’s place of birth is a matter of dispute. The most common statement of scholars is to suggest that he was born in Cappadocia. Pierre Maraval, however, argues that he was born in Pontus in Neocaesarea, where his father, Basil senior, practiced his profession as a retorician.\textsuperscript{31} His mother Emmelia was a native Cappadocian. Basil senior’s mother was Macrina the Elder, who lived during the persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire. Emmelia’s grandfather died as a martyr. Macrina the Elder was a follower of Origen of Alexandria’s and his disciple Gregory Thaumaturgus’s teaching. According to some scholars, Macrina the Elder was a pupil of Gregory Thaumaturgus, but this is very unlikely given that Gregory Thaumaturgus had most probably died before Macrina the Elder was born.\textsuperscript{32}

Basil senior’s and Emmelia’s eldest child was Macrina the Younger, and Basil the Great was born after Macrina. Gregory considered his sister Macrina and brother Basil as his spiritual teachers and held them as an example of piety.

Macrina was the first one in the family to devote herself to asceticism. When she was 12, the man who was chosen as her future betrothed died. Consequently, Macrina decided to devote herself to asceticism and led the way for the other members of the family to follow her path.\footnote{Anna M. Silvas, ‘Biography’, in Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{The Letters}, 5, 41, 176.}

Macrina persuaded her brother Basil to devote himself to asceticism. Inspired by the example of Eustathius of Sebasteia, an Armenian bishop and ascetic, Basil travelled all around Egypt and Palestine, being introduced to the solitary ascetical life of the hermits living in the desert. After his journey he started an ascetical experiment of his own by the river Iris in Annisa in 358. Gregory joined Basil in Annisa with Gregory of Nazianzus in 358. Even though Basil held Eustathius of Sebasteia and the hermits of the Egyptian desert as models for his asceticism, he was the one who organised the ascetical movement and laid down the Rule\footnote{See further in St Basil, \textit{The Rule of St Basil in Latin and English. A Revised Critical Edition}, trans. Anna M. Silvas, Collegeville, MA 2013.} of the ‘perfect life’ that was applied in monastic communities.\footnote{Werner Jaeger, \textit{Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature: Gregory of Nyssa and Macarius}, Leiden 1965, 14.} Gregory wrote his first literary work \textit{On Virginity} after Basil had finished his first edition of his Rule. In this work Gregory discusses his own views on asceticism based on his conversations with his sister Macrina and on his own experience of the monastic movement.\footnote{Anna M. Silvas, ‘Biography’, in Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{The Letters}, 27.} The work was written on Basil’s request to inspire the participants of the movement.\footnote{Nonna Verna Harrison, ‘Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c.395). The Life of Moses’, 27.} The purpose of the work was to establish a theoretical justification for the ascetical life of Basil’s Rule.\footnote{Anthony Meredith, \textit{Gregory of Nyssa}, 5.}

Gregory went through a thorough curriculum of Greek education in rhetoric and philosophy.\footnote{Anna M. Silvas, ‘Biography’, in Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{The Letters}, 27.} However, he did not attend any of the great universities, unlike his brother Basil who was a pupil of a famous rhetor Libanios while he was studying in Constantinople together with Gregory of Nazianzus.\footnote{Anthony Meredith, \textit{Gregory of Nyssa}, 3.} Gregory had Basil as his teacher, but later he acquired a more profound knowledge of philosophy than his brother.\footnote{Albert C. Geljon, \textit{Philonic Exegesis}, 49.} He was more philosophically oriented than Basil,
who was active in the practical organising of his ascetical movement. In addition, Basil was far more cautious in using sources other than Christian ones.

Gregory’s philosophical work, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, was written in the manner of Plato’s dialogues as a dialogue between Gregory and Macrina on her deathbed. After Macrina’s death, Gregory wrote his ascetical work *The Life of Macrina*, a biographical work of his sister, in which he described the life in the community of Annisa. Gregory’s work is an important source on the contemplative life of Macrina and Basil. In addition, a great number of letters written by all three Cappadocians have survived, which provide source material for the biographical details of Gregory’s life.

Even though Gregory held asceticism as an essential part of contemplative life, he was never a monk himself, and it appears that he might have even been married. Gregory states in his own writing *On Virginity* that he was “cut off” from virginity. The identity of Gregory’s wife is a debated matter. Anthony Meredith, Pierre Maraval and Charles Kannengiesser argued that Gregory’s wife was called Theosebia; Kannengiesser adds that they had a son called Cynegios. Anna M. Silvas has claimed that Theosebia was not Gregory’s wife, but his sister who was a virgin ascetic.

Gregory was baptised after finishing his studies, and was on his way to be ordained as a priest. In 360, he was taking part in the local Council of Constantinople in the company of Basil and Eustathius of Sebasteia. However, he chose a career of a rhetoric instead in the mid 360’s. Finally in the year 371, Gregory, against his own will, was persuaded by his brother Basil to be ordained as a bishop in the small town of Nyssa. It appears that Gregory had some success as a pastor among the ordinary people of Nyssa. However, he faced many problems in the controversies in church politics against the Arians and the Arian

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43 Basil the Great, *Address to the Young Men on the Right Use of Greek Literature*, 8.

44 ibid.


emperor Valens. In 378, it was possible for him to return to Nyssa and continue his work as a bishop.

The return to Nyssa and Basil’s death in 378 marked the beginning for Gregory’s activity as a writer. According to Silvas, in the year 379, he completed the work *Apology on Hexaemeron*, which was meant to show that Gregory was willing to continue the legacy of his brother as an apologist of the Neo-Nicene orthodoxy. In the period of 381–383 he completed the apologetical work *Against Eunomius*, which is a lengthy and detailed response to the doctrines of a monk called Eunomius, a disciple of Arius and a leading figure of the Neo-Arians.

In addition to the Neo-Arian controversy, there was also another dispute about the doctrine of the Trinity with the Pneumatomachians, who were influential in Macedonia. During the years 381–382, Gregory wrote several letter-treatises in response to the Pneumatomachian accusations concerning the doctrine of the Trinity. Gregory took part in the Council of Constantinople where the controversies were discussed among the Neo-Niceans, Neo-Arians and Pneumatomachians. He delivered the funeral oration on Meletius, in memory of the bishop of Antioch, who was the leader of the council. In 386/387 he finished his *Catechetical Discourse*, a presentation of a systematic theology based on the principal dogmas of the Nicean Orthodoxy and their defense.

According to Jean Daniélou, the end of the year 387 marked the beginning of a new period in Gregory’s life; he was no longer occupied with theological controversies, which gave him more time to concentrate on his writings on spirituality, philosophy, and contemplation. According to Harrison, the fruit of this period was the forming of Gregory’s mystical theology, presented in the works *The Life of Moses*, *The Commentary on the Song of Songs*, *The Commentary of the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, *The Beatitudes*, and *On

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55 ibid. 55.
Perfection. This study is concentrated mainly on these works due to the rich symbolical content of these texts written in his later years.

1.3. The Life of Moses – The Form and Purpose of the Treatise
I chose Gregory’s work The Life of Moses as the main source of this study since it is a detailed presentation of Gregory of Nyssa’s allegorical exegesis, rich in symbolic interpretations. As a primary source for this study I am going to use Jean Daniélou’s Greek edition (Sources chrétiennes) on Gregory’s The Life of Moses. The first part of the work is a presentation of the journey of Moses and the Israelites from Egypt through the Red Sea and the desert to Mount Sinai and beyond. In the second part of the work, Gregory presents his interpretation of several locations of the journey of Moses and the Israelites. The Life of Moses concentrates on the interpretations of the Moses narrative as presented in the Books of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Gregory is fairly faithful to the original order of events in the narrative of the Pentateuch, deviating only three times from the original in the treatise. As an author writing in Greek, Gregory’s interpretations are based on the narrative of the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Dating The Life of Moses accurately has been a challenging task for scholars. Daniélou placed The Life of Moses between Commentary on the Song of Songs and On Perfection. Ronald Heine argues that it would be more likely that the work was written in the mid 380’s, when the Eunomian controversy was still on Gregory’s mind. According to Werner Jaeger The Life of Moses was written during the last years of Gregory’s life, around 390. Jaeger’s estimate is based on Gregory’s statement in the treatise that he was in “his old age” and that he had “white hair”. Anthony Meredith, on the other hand, contests Jaeger's premises deeming them “frail”, given that Gregory used such a description of himself already when he was 40. Meredith argues that The Life of Moses was written

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60 Ronald E. Heine, Perfection in the Virtuous Life, 15.
61 Werner Jaeger, Two Rediscovered Works, 119.
63 Anthony Meredith, Gregory of Nyssa, 99.
some time after 381; the exact year is unknown.\textsuperscript{64} Conclusively, Ann Conway-Jones has admitted that dating Gregory’s works “is not an exact science”.\textsuperscript{65} The treatise was with most certainty written by Gregory of Nyssa, since no one has yet doubted the genuineness of the work.\textsuperscript{66}

The Life of Moses forms a series of symbolic exegesis based on the Old Testament with Commentary of the Inscriptions of the Psalms and Commentary on the Song of Songs, which gives reason to suggest that these three works were written around the same period of time. There are thematic similarities between these two works; in The Life of Moses, Moses is held by Gregory as an example of an ascending soul towards God, whereas in The Commentary of Song of Songs, the bride of the narrative functions as a symbol of an ascending soul. In addition, negative theology plays a key role in both works.\textsuperscript{67}

Gregory’s treatise is divided into four sections: preface, Book I, Book II, and conclusion. Preface and conclusion are very short in length; therefore the work has usually been divided by scholars into two parts, where the preface and Book I form together the first part of the treatise, whereas Book II and the conclusion form the second part.

The aim of the treatise is presented in the beginning of the work:

Since the letter which you recently sent requested us to furnish you with some counsel concerning the perfect life, I thought it only proper to answer your request.\textsuperscript{68}

The Life of Moses is a letter-treatise that was an answer to a request for spiritual counsel on ”the perfect life”. Gregory had already written several letters in a treatise form against the Pneumatomachians.\textsuperscript{69} Herbert Musurillo has argued that the treatise is not a bios or vita of Moses, but a logos on perfection; Gregory’s primary interest is not the historical details of the Life of Moses, but as a historia, “that is, as a text by which the meaning of the life of a Christian could be taught and illustrated”. Musurillo’s suggestion of the work as a logos does not reappear in the scholarly discussion. The first part of the treatise certainly has biographical elements, while the second part presents the theoria, the allegorical interpretation based on the narrative. However, Musurillo is right about the fact that the main

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\item[64] Anthony Meredith, The Cappadocians, 68.
\item[65] Ann Conway-Jones, Gregory of Nyssa’s Tabernacle Imagery, 24.
\item[67] Albert C. Geljon, Philonic Exegesis, 63.
\end{itemize}
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emphasis of Gregory is not on making an accurate historical presentation of the life of Moses, as a modern historian would do, but the treatise rather concentrates on the content of the interpretation (theoria) based on the Exodus narrative.\textsuperscript{70} Gregory himself describes the first part, the historia, as a summary of the events of Moses’s life. Gregory compiled here the most essential core of the original narrative.\textsuperscript{71} The function of historia is to present a narrative based on the Pentateuch that is faithful to the original Biblical text, and build a foundation in a compact form to support a deeper analysis of the meanings of the details presented in the narrative of the theoria.

Arthur P. Urbano sees Gregory’s The Life of Moses as part of the tradition of philosophical \textit{bioi}, such as Xenophon’s Memoria\ae, Diogenes Laertius’s \textit{Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers}, and Plutarch’s \textit{Parallel Lives}. In this form of literature, the subject of the \textit{bio} serves as a model for imitation in virtue.\textsuperscript{72} Philo’s philosophical \textit{bio} on Moses serves as a model for the form of Gregory’s treatise since it has two parts as well, and focuses on the philosophical aspects of Moses’s life. However, the contents of Philo’s and Gregory’s interpretations based on the Exodus narrative are very different. As Geljon has noted, Philo’s work hardly contains any allegorical exegesis, whereas Gregory’s second part of the treatise is rich in allegory. In few cases where Philo presents an allegorical interpretation, Gregory gives a completely different interpretation based on the same Biblical passage. Gregory rather seems to have borrowed allegorical details from Philo’s other works, such as \textit{Allegorical Interpretation}.\textsuperscript{73}

The Life of Moses was certainly not meant as a teaching for beginners; only the material of the first part could have been used for teaching at a beginner or intermediate level. According to Simo Knuuttila, the Alexandrians and the Cappadocians were primarily interested in developing a spirituality of Christians aiming for perfection, and that ordinary people should imitate the models of perfection as much as possible.\textsuperscript{74} The treatise was written for an audience that already had studied the literal sense of the Exodus narrative and had a desire for a deeper understanding. The advanced level of interpretation, the theoria, was meant for an audience that was ‘aiming for perfection’; they were already engaged

\textsuperscript{71} Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{The Life of Moses}, 1.77.
\textsuperscript{72} Arthur P. Urbano, \textit{The Philosophical Life}, 18–20.
\textsuperscript{73} Albert C. Geljon, \textit{Philonic Exegesis}, 167–170.
\textsuperscript{74} Simo Knuuttila, \textit{Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy}, Oxford 2004, 143.
in deeper biblical learning, philosophy, and contemplation, which Gregory described as ‘philosophical life’. Gregory’s description of the praxis, the philosophical life, is as symbolical as his exegesis. He doesn’t provide any accurate descriptions of what philosophical life means in practice, perhaps because it was more of his brother Basil’s task. Instead, he provides an ambiguous allegory of a pomegranate as a symbol of the hidden beauty that is revealed for those who are engaged in philosophical life.

Because it is covered with a hard and sour rind, its outside is inedible, but the inside is a pleasant sight with its many neatly ordered seeds and it becomes even sweeter when it is tasted. The philosophical life, although outwardly austere and unpleasant, is yet full of good hopes when it ripens. For when our Gardener opens the pomegranate of life at the proper time and manifests the hidden beauty, then those who partake of their own fruit will enjoy the sweetness.

In the conclusion of the treatise one can see that the letter was addressed to a man called Caesarius, ‘a man of God’. The name is not mentioned in all manuscripts and the identity of Caesarius is unknown. Malherbe and Ferguson suggested that the treatise was meant for the education of monks in Basil’s ascetical movement. Roland Heine argued that the treatise was actually meant not for the monks but for the priests, since Gregory interprets Aaron’s rod as “the staff of the priesthood” that blossoms in Caesarius. In addition, Heine argues that there is an emphasis on leadership of the Church in the entire treatise. Heine might be right about Gregory focusing rather on the education of priests within his treatise, since Gregory has hardly included any practical advice as such for contemplative life within the treatise.

Andrea Sterk has suggested that Gregory promoted a monastic model of church leadership. Sterk argued that Gregory’s model for the education of bishops would be threefold: “Ideally the candidate should be educated in profane learning, abandon academic and all other ambitions for the contemplative life, and finally sacrifice even the enjoyment of monastic solitude in order actively to serve the people of God.” Moses’s life would then serve for Gregory as a model of a monk-

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77 ibid. 2.319.
bishop, which became the norm in the Christian East. This is true in Gregory’s case since he had to abandon his career as a rhetorician in order to become the bishop of Nyssa. However, one must keep in mind that Gregory did not mean to abandon education or philosophy completely, but they played an important role in Biblical interpretation as well as in theological and philosophical debates between different religious and philosophical groups. Gregory’s model was about re-evaluating the theological and philosophical premises of his Christian, Greek and Jewish predecessors on the basis of the usefulness of their doctrines. Gregory’s aim was to legitimise the use of philosophy among Christians, and define the place of Greek paideia in Christian education. Gregory represents the line of Clement, Origen and Basil, who saw usefulness in Greek paideia, against those Christians who did not see any place of Greek paideia in Christian education.

Gregory held Basil as an example of a bishop, who had acquired himself a thorough education in profane learning, and was able to use this knowledge in a fruitful way for the benefit of the Church. The cultural initiative of the Alexandrian school of exegesis was to deepen the interpretation of Scripture so that it would have been better accepted among readers of higher education in philosophy and Greek paideia, and Gregory furthers this tradition’s continuity.

2. Gregory of Nyssa’s Method of Exegesis – Origins and Terminology

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the origins and terminology of Gregory’s exegetical method. In order to understand the exegetical and philosophical concepts and terminology that Gregory is applying, one must take into account the long historical development behind Gregory’s terminology that is rooted in classical Greek philosophical tradition. As Luc Brisson and David Dawson have shown, Greek philosophers were already using different methods of allegorical interpretation with Homeric texts. Some Christians, ancient and modern, have been more aware of the long history of allegory than others. For the ancients, the allegorical sense was not about creating imaginative expressions as it

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began to be understood from the Romantic period onwards, but it was applied with the purpose of discovering the hidden meaning in the original passage. In the ancient context, allegory was applied to show moral, metaphysical, interpretational, spiritual, or mystical aspects of a particular passage or a narrative. There has been a discussion among scholars on the Greek interpreters and their methods, and their possible influence on Biblical interpretation. According to Filippomaria Pontani, despite recent studies of Dawson, the influence of the Greek allegorical interpreters continues to be underestimated by scholars.

The task in Gregory’s case is challenging since he rarely mentions his sources. I am going to show in this chapter how Gregory was relying on the terminology used by his Greek, Jewish and Christian predecessors. Gregory was well aware of the terminology being used in the interpretation of Scripture. However, he doesn’t systematically define his terminology and concepts. Therefore, I see the importance of analysing different terms and concepts that were in use already in the exegesis of his predecessors, and how Gregory is dependent on them. I am going to show how allegory as a form of interpretation was defended and criticised by theologians and philosophers. The discussion of the use of allegory still continues among scholars. In the final subchapter (2.9.) I will provide a brief historical overview of the receptance of the use of allegorical exegesis in the Middle Ages, Reformation, Enlightenment and the Modern Era.

2.1. Theoria and Hermeneia
Jean Daniélou has distinguished three contexts where the word *theoria* is used in ancient thought: a) scientific knowledge, b) exegetical method, and c) mystical contemplation. The word has an Aristotelian background, meaning contemplation of the mind or natural contemplation, that is, studying the whole reality and all of its sensible and non-sensible objects. Giulio Maspero states that Gregory uses the word in the meaning of “knowledge of the various categories of beings.”

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In The Life of Moses, the word is used in the context of Biblical interpretation. Daniélou has stated that *theoria* means for Gregory *hermeneutics*. Quite an interesting fact is that Gregory himself is using the word *hermeneia* (interpretation), which is the etymological root word for hermeneutics. However, one must be careful not to mix up modern connotations of hermeneutics with the patristic context of Gregory’s exegesis. I would suggest that, to avoid misunderstandings, a good translation for Gregory’s *theoria* would simply be ‘interpretation’, as Ann Conway-Jones suggests.

*Theoria* as a concept of Biblical interpretation is already present in Alexandrian exegesis. Philo explains his method of interpreting the laws of the Torah in a following manner:

> These then are the ordinances contained in the express language of these commandments (*rhetai prostaxeis*); but there is also an allegorical (*allegoresai*) meaning concealed beneath, which we must extract by a careful consideration (*theorian*) of the figurative expressions used (*dia symbolon*).

The Mosaic Law according to Philo contains a) the literal commandments (*rhetai prostaxeis*) and b) *theoria*, which is the symbolical interpretation of the original written text. *Theoria* is also part of Origen’s vocabulary in Biblical interpretation. Jesus, then, is the Son of God, who gave the law and the prophets; and we, who belong to the Church, do not transgress the law, but have escaped the mythologizings of the Jews, and have our minds chastened and educated by the mystical contemplation (*mystike theoria*) of the law and the prophets. For the prophets themselves, as not resting the sense of these words in the plain history which they relate, nor in the legal enactments taken according to the word and letter.

Origen here defines the Christian method of interpreting the laws and prophecies of the Old Testament as mystical *theoria*, which differs from the Jewish exegesis that is based on following the commandments literally. Origen states here that Christian mystical interpretation relies on the tradition of the prophets of the Old Testament. Gregory presents a similar twofold division in the interpretation of the uplifted hands of Moses.

If the people saw the hands of their lawgiver lifted up, they prevailed over the enemy in battle; but if they saw them hanging limp, they fell

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back. Moses' holding his hands aloft signifies the contemplation (theorion) of the Law with lofty insights; his letting them hang to earth signifies the mean and lowly literal exposition and observance of the Law.96

Gregory's interpretation of the Law is clearly based on the Alexandrian tradition. In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory is focusing on the narrative of Moses and the Israelites and does not provide a detailed analysis of the legal enactments, but often passes them over and leaves them uninterpreted.97

Gregory’s idea in *The Life of Moses* to divide the treatise into two separate chapters, historia and theoria, is something original in comparison with his predecessors. In Alexandrian interpretation, theoria, the interpretation of a particular Biblical passage, usually directly follows the explanation of the literal sense. The same technique is used in Gregory’s double narrative to remind the reader of the original Biblical event that the interpretation is based on, as one can see in the interpretation of Moses’s uplifted hands presented earlier. The Alexandrians present one narrative with various symbolical details, whereas Gregory presents two narratives, one for historia and one for theoria. As noted earlier, historia is a summary based on the original Biblical narrative. Gregory’s idea here is that also the theoria, the double narrative, must form a logical pattern.

According to Monique Alexander, in the prologue of *Commentary of the Song of Songs*, Gregory lists four different reasons for rejecting the literal sense: 1. theological impropriety, 2. physical or logical impossibility, 3. uselessness, and 4. immorality. In such cases when the literal sense is rejected, it is more applicable to search for a spiritual meaning in that particular passage. According to Heine, this model of interpretation is based on Philo’s and Origen’s earlier models.98 It is a mistake to say that theoria solely signifies the spiritual sense, as it might at first seem to appear. In some cases, the literal sense can be the same as spiritual sense, for example in the case of Pauline passages that already provide an interpretation of a particular Biblical passage. Paul’s images and types are the fundamental basis of Gregory’s allegorical exegesis, and therefore the passages that were already interpreted by Paul do not necessarily need an interpretation. A good example of this is a passage in *The Life of Moses* where Gregory states that

97 As an exception, see Gregory’s interpretation of circumcision, p. 24.
the throne of mercy needs no interpretation (hermeneias), as some other details inside the temple, since Apostle Paul has already “laid bare what is hidden”.  

2.2. *Hyponoia* – Platonic and Stoic Origin

The word ‘allegory’ derives from the Greek word allegoria, “to say other things, i.e., to say one thing in order to signify another”. The word derives from the Greek words allos (“other”) and agoreuein (“to speak in the agora,” i.e., “publicly”).  

Gregory uses the word only six times in his works, which seems to indicate that he was avoiding the use of it, since some exegetes saw the word in a negative way.  

During the time of Plato and Aristotle the noun *hyponoia* or verb *hyponoein*, “to see under”, was a common word for underlying meanings of a narrative.  

According to Plutarch (c. 45–c. 120 A.D.), *hyponoia* was an older word that was used before, having the same meaning as *allegoria* in Plutarch’s time. *Hyponoia* is part of Gregory of Nyssa’s vocabulary as well. It is used once in *The Life of Moses*:

> While following these things in the sequence of our investigation, we were led to a deeper meaning (hyponoian) in contemplating (theorias) this passage.  

For Gregory, *hyponoia* is a detail of a Biblical narrative that has been interpreted figuratively.

Prodicus (fl. Late 5th century B.C.) was among the first who presented naturalistic allegorical interpretations on the names of the gods. Antisthenes (c. 445–c. 365 B.C.), the founder of Cynic school of philosophy, was seeking for hidden meanings of Homeric myths, but it was his successor, Zeno of Citium, who made allegorical interpretations on a wider scale. Zeno claimed that Homeric myths contained deeper meanings that had to be discovered by etymological analysis of the names of the gods. His successors Cleanthes (331–232 B.C.) and Chrysippus (c. 280–c. 206 B.C.) adopted Zeno’s method, but ended

103 David Dawson, *Allegorical Readers*, 64.  
105 Prodicus thought that the reason why Demeter represented bread, Dionysus wine, Poseidon water and Hephaistus fire was because they were useful and beneficial things for human kind. Charles H. Khan, ‘Prodicus’, in E. Craig (Ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, London 1998.  
106 Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses*, vol. 3, 53.5.
up with different allegorical conclusions. This type of interpretation has been defined by Brisson as physical allegory, which was further practiced by Cornutus, a Stoic philosopher who flourished under the reign of Nero, as well as Heraclitus the Stoic, a contemporary of Cicero (106–43 B.C.). There is also a trace of physical allegory in Plato’s *Theaetetus* 153A–B; this however doesn’t mean that Plato himself endorsed the practice.

The Stoic method of etymological analysis was rejected by other Greek schools of philosophy. Plutarch, another critic of the Stoics, warns about their etymological allegory, saying that these kind of interpretations lead into atheism, for they reduce the gods to “mere natural or moral forces”. Plutarch does not advise to interpret Homeric myths literally either, for according to him this leads to absurdity and superstition. He admits that some of the Homeric myths are purely fictional. Church Father Tatian argued that interpreting the gods symbolically as forces of nature or natural elements makes the gods lose their importance, and therefore their veneration is pointless. In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory criticises those who see God as a material object, which seems to be a reference against the Stoic etymological interpretations of the gods. Philo and Origen were using etymological allegory based on the Hebrew names and places in the Scriptures. However, etymological allegory of the Alexandrians differs from the practices of the Stoics. Etymological allegory is not implemented in Gregory of Nyssa’s exegesis.

The criticism of the use of *hyponoia* began among the philosophers when they started to pay more attention to how the poets, notably Homer and Hesiod, portrayed gods and their affairs in their writings. The philosophers started to see

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107 Zeno argued that the Titans represent the elements of the world, whereas for Cleanthes, Apollo represented the sun. Luc Brisson, *Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology*, 46.
the portrayals of the gods not only in a positive light. Pythagoras (c. 570–c.500 B.C.) seems to have been extremely unsatisfied with Homeric teachings about the gods, seeing Homer and Hesiod “being tortured in the afterlife”.117 Xenophanes of Colophon (c.570–c.475 B.C.) criticised Homer and Hesiod for making the gods do shameful things in their poems, such as stealing or committing adultery.118 Plato (427–347 B.C.) adopted Xenophanes’s criticism of poetry. He was concerned that the youth would become subjects to the immoralities of the Homeric portrayals of the gods. He rejected the common and popular practice of treating Homeric gods allegorically, “for the young are not able to distinguish what is and what is not allegory (hyponoia)”.119 Homeric poetry had naturally many admirers who called Homer ‘the educator of Greece’ and who thought that everyone should dedicate their entire lives to studying Homer’s poetry. Homer was seen as the ‘all wise’ teacher,120 the primary source of the study of morals, manners and religion.121 Plato’s critique of poetry presented in The Republic was aimed towards this kind of worldview. According to Luc Brisson, Plato wanted to break the ”monopoly of myth” and set philosophical discourse as the superior way for seeking true knowledge.122 On the other hand, Plato’s criticism of allegory did not stop him from creating metaphysical allegories himself, such as his own famous allegory of the cave123, the chariot allegory124, or the allegory of the sea of beauty.125 Also moral allegory was used by Plato, such as allegory of the seamaster.126 Plato’s allegories had a great impact on the symbolic exegesis of the Neoplatonists, Alexandrians as well as Gregory of Nyssa.

Gregory’s brother Basil’s criticism against the immoralities of poetry in his treatise Address to the Young Men is based on the earlier criticism of Plato.

118 Luc Brisson, Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology, 9.
120 “You know, doubtless, that the sage Homer has written about practically everything pertaining to man.” Xenophon, ‘Symposium’, trans. E. C. Marchant & O. J. Todd, 4.6.
121 “‘Then, Glaucion,’ said I, ‘when you meet encomiasts of Homer who tell us that this poet has been the educator of Hellas, and that for the conduct and refinement of human life he is worthy of our study and devotion, and that we should order our entire lives by the guidance of this poet…’” Plato, The Republic, trans. Paul Shorey , 606E.
122 Philip S. Alexander, ‘‘Homer the Prophet of All’ and ‘Moses our Teacher’’, 130–131; Luc Brisson, Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology, 19.
123 Plato, The Republic, 514A–520A.
124 Plato, Phaedrus, 246A–257B.
125 Plato, Symposium, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 210D.
126 Plato, The Republic, 488A–489A.
We shall not praise the poets when they scoff and rail, when they represent fornicators and winebibbers, when they define blissfulness by groaning tables and wanton songs. Least of all shall we listen to them when they tell us of their gods, and especially when they represent them as being many, and not at one among themselves. For, among these gods, at one time brother is at variance with brother, or the father with his children; at another, the children engage in truceless war against their parents. The adulteries of the gods and their amours, and especially those of the one whom they call Zeus, chief of all and most high, things of which one cannot speak, even in connection with brutes, without blushing, we shall leave to the stage.  

Basil thought that Greek learning was not unprofitable, but one should be cautious and not adopt influences from non-Christian sources without criticism. Only the things that are useful and truthful should be taken into account, and the rest should be passed over. Gregory of Nyssa was more open and receptive for Greek paideia than his brother Basil, but also did not accept Greek concepts without criticism.

It commands those participating through virtue in the free life also to equip themselves with the wealth of pagan learning by which foreigners to the faith beautify themselves. Our guide in virtue commands someone who "borrows" from wealthy Egyptians to receive such things as moral and natural philosophy, geometry, astronomy, dialectic, and whatever else is sought by those outside the Church, since these things will be useful when in time the divine sanctuary of mystery must be beautified with the riches of reason.

Gregory seems to have more of an Aristotelian view in comparison with his brother’s Platonic moral criticism against Greek paideia. Gregory saw that profane moral and natural philosophy can become “a companion to the higher way”, as long as one doesn’t separate himself from the teaching of the Church. Because of this kind of openness, moral and metaphysical allegory play a key role in his exegesis.

Gregory sees that the synthesis of theology and philosophy is possible, “provided that the offspring of this union introduce nothing of a foreign defilement.” As already stated earlier, Gregory does not promote complete abandoning of Greek paideia, but to leave behind only erroneous doctrines and

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128 ibid. 4, 8.
130 ibid. 2.12.
131 ibid. 2.37.
heretical opinions. Ari Ojell sees an Aristotelian apnairetic character in Gregory’s exegesis:

There is something fleshly and uncircumcised in what is taught by philosophy's generative faculty; when that has been completely removed, there remains the pure Israelite race.”

Gregory uses here circumcision as an allegory of aphairesis, which means to “strip off the flesh”, to leave behind one’s own erroneous conception, the human opinion (doxa) in order to be able to reveal the truthful meaning of the message.

2.3. Aletheia and Doxa – Parmenidean Origin

After Plato’s criticism of Homeric portrayals of the gods, there was no point of return to the old ways of interpreting Homer’s myths. Therefore the defenders of Homer’s poetry had to develop a new way of interpreting the myths, so that they would have not been seen as mere fables. According to Dio Chrysostom (c. 40–c. 120), there was discussion among the philosophers whether Homer “erred” in his portrayals of the gods or whether “he was merely transmitting to mankind certain doctrines about natural phenomena embodied in the myths after the fashion then in vogue.”

According to Dio Chrysostom, it was Antisthenes (c. 445–c. 365 B.C.) and later Zeno of Citium (335–263 B.C.), the founder of the Stoic school of philosophy, who believed that in Homer’s writings some things were considered as doxa (human opinion) and some things as aletheia (the truth), for they had “to save Homer from appearing to be at war with himself in certain matters which are held to be inconsistent with each other”. Dio Chrysostom’s testimony shows us that already during the time of Antisthenes the philosophers tried to save the Homeric myths by developing a new method of interpretation to give answers to the criticism against Homeric poetry. A citation of Clement of Alexandria tells us that the twofold division of knowledge into aletheia and doxa is a concept of Parmenides (fl. late 6th cn.–early 5th cn.), the teacher of Zeno.

And the great Parmenides of Elea is introduced describing thus the teaching of the two ways:— “The one is the dauntless heart of

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132 ibid. 2.16.
133 ibid. 2.39.
134 Ari Ojell, One Word, One Body, One Voice, 40.
136 Luc Brisson, Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology, 45.
137 Dio Chrysostom, Discourses, trans. Lamar Crosby, 53.5.
convincing truth (Aletheies); The other is in the opinions (doxas) of men, in whom is no true faith.”

Martin Heidegger has pointed out that the word aletheia has to be understood correctly in the Greek context, meaning un concealment. The etymology of the term gives an intriguing insight into the context of interpretation of texts. The truth, aletheia, is something concealed that need to be discovered by removing human opinion (doxa). The true essence of things cannot be grasped with words; therefore, the ancients are pointing towards the true essence of things by means of enigmas, metaphors and allegories, which, without proper interpretation are mere doxa. The true meaning of a mystical passage appears only in unconcealment, after a process of decyphering the fundamental true meaning which the ancients had hidden into enigma.

In Plato’s model, based on Parmenides, doxa is opposed to truth (aletheia), as well as scientific knowledge (episteme). According to Algis Uždavinys, Plato’s theory based on Parmenides makes a distinction between “the outer surface of myths, rites, and statues, and their inner meanings…” The method of Parmenides, the two ways of aletheia and doxa, the way of truth and the way of opinion, and its later development led the way for the kind of interpretation, in which the philosophers tried to separate what is doxa and what is the true higher meaning of a particular detail of a narrative.

According to Werner Jaeger, distinction between doxa and aletheia, based on Parmenides and Plato, was adopted by Christian interpreters. This applies also to Gregory, who in The Life of Moses warns about false teachings and erroneous reasonings that withstand the truth (Aletheia). One must go through the preparatory process of purification by washing off doxa before being able to perceive true knowledge of things.

He who would approach the knowledge of things sublime must first purify his manner of life from all sensual and irrational emotion. He must wash from his understanding every opinion (doxan) derived from some preconception…

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143 Werner Jaeger, Early Christianity and Greek Paideia, 55.
145 ibid. 2.157.
A complete state of unconcealedness (*aletheia*) is reserved by Gregory only for God.146 *Aletheia* is unattainable for man, since God is infinite by nature. God is invisible and unknowable, since he is beyond all sense perception and intellectual concepts.

According to Gregory, *aletheia* is about having correct understanding of True Being; All things are dependent on the existence of True Being which alone subsists, in opposition to non-being, which exists only in seeming (*doxa*).147 For Gregory, *aletheia* is unchangeable, not increasing or diminishing, and in need of nothing. It is difficult to say if Gregory adopted his concept of *aletheia* and *doxa* from Parmenides, Plato, or their numerous commentators, since he rarely mentions his philosophical sources. It is, however clear that the origins of Gregory’s apophaticism rely on Parmenides, who described the path of *It is (aletheia)* as uncreated, indestructible, immovable, without beginning nor end, non-divisible, and in need of nothing (Fragment 8). Parmenides’s definition has certainly influenced Plato’s definition of Beauty (eternal, uncreated, indestructible and affected by nothing148), as well as Aristotle’s immovable mover, which is also identified with Good and Beauty.149

### 2.4. *Ainigma* and *Metaphora* – Aristotelian Origin

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) took a conciliatory stance towards allegory, perhaps, because he linked philosophy and myth closely together, and didn’t see them as opposites as Plato did. For Aristotle, the lover of myth is also a lover of wisdom and wonder.150 Plato took a critical stance on poetry, whereas Aristotle was a lover of poetry and tragedy. For Aristotle, the main focus of poetry was not in the moral or factual content; the main function of poetry for him was to cause emotional response and to bring enjoyment. The characters of a play are not meant to speak merely about historical facts or be seen as role models that need to be imitated.151 According to Aristotle, a narration without allegory is, of course, clear and easy to understand, but too commonplace. The critics of poetry are

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146 This was already attested by Philo, who saw that "that which really is" (*ontos on*) is reserved to God alone. David L. Balás, *Metousia Theou*, 103; H. A. Wolfson, *Philo. Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam I*. Cambridge 1947, 210.


148 Plato, *Symposium*, 210E–211B.


151 Arto Kivimäki, ‘*I Aloittelijoille*’, in Heinonen etc., *Aristoteleen runousoppi. Opas aloittelijoille ja edistyneille.*, Juva 2012, 33, 47.
therefore wrong to completely reject allegorical methods; in poetry, the best result is achieved by using allegorical expressions moderately.\footnote{Aristotle, \textit{Poetics}, in \textit{Aristotle in 23 Volumes}, vols. 17 & 18, trans. Hugh Tredennick, Cambridge, MA & London 1989, 1458a–b.} The kind of allegory described by Aristotle is not the same type as the Church Father’s, but the kind of allegory that serves the purpose of art, since the aim of allegory here is to create an intriguing plot and not to find the hidden meanings on a given text.

Aristotle mentions metaphor (\textit{metaphora}) and enigma (\textit{ainigma}) as useful tools for a skillful poet. For Aristotle, \textit{metaphora} means transferring a word to another context,\footnote{See the exact definition of \textit{metaphora} in Aristotle, ‘\textit{Poetics’}, 1457B.} whereas the word \textit{ainigma} is a statement of “ambiguous or obscure meaning”, i.e. a dark saying, a riddle or a mystery.\footnote{Luc Brisson, \textit{Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology}, 58–59; G. W. H. Lampe (ed), \textit{A Patristic Greek Lexicon}, Oxford 1961, 50.} Both \textit{metaphora} and \textit{ainigma} are also part of Gregory of Nyssa’s vocabulary. The word \textit{metaphora} appears rarely, while \textit{ainigma} appears numerous times in \textit{The Life of Moses} as well as in Gregory’s own interpretation of Biblical poetry, \textit{The Commentary of Song of Songs}.

In addition to artistic allegory, Aristotle uses allegory also as an interpretative tool for discovering the deeper meanings of Homeric myths. Aristotle’s own example of metaphysical allegory is based on the myth presented in the beginning of the 8th book of Homer’s \textit{Iliad}. Aristotle saw that Zeus, who was able to pull the weight of all the other gods combined, along with the earth and the sea, and all creation, represents the immovable mover.\footnote{Aristotle, \textit{On the Motions of Animals}, 700a7-700a12; Luc Brisson, \textit{Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology}, 39.} The tradition of immovable mover goes back to Parmenides, who describes his \textit{It is} as immovable (Fragment 8).

Aristotle took a stance on the matter of Homeric anthropomorphisms of the gods, which to him are a later addition to the tradition, and should not be taken literally. However, the gods represent the “primary substances”, the Divine that "pervades the whole of nature”. Therefore the myths should not be neither discarded nor taken literally in the philosophical discussion, but they should instead be regarded as "inspired sayings".\footnote{Luc Brisson, \textit{Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology}, 38.}

Gregory’s view on anthropomorphic depictions of God in the Old Testament is clearly established in \textit{The Life of Moses} in Gregory’s interpretation.
of Ex. 33:21–23\textsuperscript{157}, which mentions God’s hands and back. Gregory sees the attempts to interpret these passages literally as inappropriate and absurd, since God is according to Gregory incorporeal and shapeless. He suggests that in these kind of situations one must rather look for a spiritual meaning. Such a rejection of literal interpretations considering anthropomorphisms of the Bible is based on earlier criticism of Philo,\textsuperscript{158} Clement of Alexandria,\textsuperscript{159} and Origen. The criticism of the Biblical interpreters is not an original idea but it has its origin in Aristotle’s and Xenophanes’s criticism of anthropomorphic depictions of the Homeric gods.\textsuperscript{160}

### 2.5. Neoplatonic Origin

The allegorical interpretation of the Neoplatonists, such as Plotinus (205-69/70 A.D.) and Porphyry (234-c. 305 A.D.), has been seen by Peter T. Struck as a continuation of the early Stoic idea, that myth, rites, and poetry contain truths that exceed the grasp of plain speech. Plotinus’s and Porphyry’s allegorical interpretation is a departure from the traditional Stoic physical allegory towards metaphysical allegory. In addition with the poetry of Homer and Hesiod, the Neoplatonists used the works of Plato and Pythagoras, as well as the \textit{Chaldean Oracles} and the \textit{Orphic Rhapsodies} as sources of interpretation. The scholars see the influence of Cornutus, Numenius and Cronius in Plotinus’s and Porphyry’s allegorical interpretation. According to Brisson, the interpreter of philosophical or poetic texts was seen by the Neoplatonists as a mystagogue who guided the candidates toward initiation.\textsuperscript{161}

Plotinus’s metaphysical system is based on a metaphysical allegory of Homeric narratives. For Plotinus, the three gods of Hesiod’s theogony, Ouranos, Kronos and Zeus, represent the three hypostases (the One, the Intellect, and the Soul) of Plotinus’s metaphysical system. Plotinus makes interpretations according to other gods as well: the name of Apollo points to the absence of any

\textsuperscript{157} “Then the LORD said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."” NIV 2011.

\textsuperscript{158} On Philo’s rejection on literal interpretation of anthropomorphisms, see Philo, \textit{On the Confusion of Tongues}, 27 (134).

\textsuperscript{159} Clement of Alexandria, \textit{Stromata}, 5.11.


multiplicity, Prometheus stands for providence, and Pandora represents the arrival of the soul in the sensible world.\textsuperscript{162}

There has been a discussion on the possible influence of Neoplatonism on Gregory’s thought. The primary question among scholars has been whether Gregory used Plotinus as a source for his view on divine infinity. In \textit{The Life of Moses}, Gregory defines divine nature as limitless and infinite.\textsuperscript{163} Here Gregory’s source is certainly not Origen, who states that God cannot be infinite since if he were, he could not know himself.\textsuperscript{164} Plotinus, on the other hand, asserts his first hypostase, the One, as infinite and formless. However, Plotinus’s system, based on the allegory of Hesiod’s poem, is different in comparison with Gregory’s view. The One of Plotinus is infinite, but not a dominant primary attribute as in Gregory’s model. Gregory may have gotten the idea of divine infinity from Plotinus, but he applies it in a very original way in a Christian framework.\textsuperscript{165} Gregory’s thesis on God’s infinity, a metaphysical allegory based on the interpretation of the mountain theophany of Moses, is largely without precedent.\textsuperscript{166} Although there have been attempts by some scholars, such as Henri Guyot and Albert Geljon, to connect Gregory’s concept of divine infinity with Philo, this treatment has difficulties since Philo never calls God infinite.\textsuperscript{167}

In Plotinus’s other allegory based on Homer, he sees the journey of Odysseus as “an allegory of the soul returning to its homeland”.\textsuperscript{168} Although there is no trace in Gregory’s works of this particular allegory, it shows that the Neoplatonists were interiorizing Homeric myths in a paradigmatic manner in a similar way to what Philo, Origen and Gregory did for Biblical narratives. In addition, the Neoplatonists were using the term \textit{anagoge} for their spiritual ascent into the divine realm in their practice of theurgy.\textsuperscript{169} The same term was applied by Origen and Gregory, as I am going to show in subchapter 2.7. Nevertheless, as Jaroslav Pelikan has noted, Gregory is himself referring mostly to Plato and

\begin{footnotes}
162 Luc Brisson, \textit{ Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology}, 75–76, 80.
163 Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{The Life of Moses}, 1.7.
164 Anthony Meredith, \textit{The Cappadocians}, 66.
\end{footnotes}
Aristotle and not to the Neoplatonists, which makes it difficult to assess the influence of the Neoplatonists in Gregory’s thought. 170

2.6. Symbolon – Pythagorean and Alexandrian Origin

The etymology of the word ‘symbol’ derives from the Greek word *symbollo*, ‘throw, dash, bring or join together’. 171 According to Brisson, in Ancient Greek context, if we are speaking or writing symbolically, we are connecting two things together, whether we talk about the two matching objects or about double meaning of a message. 172 Originally, the word *symbolon* meant a token, which was given to a friend as a mark of friendship. 173 In the practice of theurgy, the Neoplatonists were using symbols (*symbola*) to open themselves spiritually to the divine realm. 174

Symbolic interpretation was an important method especially for Pythagoras, as attested by Plutarch, Iambichlus and Porphyry. 175 According to Porphyry, Pythagoras’s model for interpreting symbols was twofold: plain sense for the beginners and symbolical sense for the advanced. According to Plutarch and Porphyry, Pythagoras was engaged in the study of Egyptian hieroglyphs. 176 Plutarch rejected the use of allegory in the interpretation of Homeric myths; however, he had a keen interest in Pythagorean symbolism. 177 In his treatise *On Isis and Osiris*, Plutarch shows that it was Pythagoras who made Egyptian hieroglyphs known in the Greek world. 178 Balás has argued that Gregory of Nyssa knew Plutarch’s work and refers to it in *Against Eunomius* III.10.41, refuting Eunomius of mixing elements of Egyptian religion with Christian gospel. 179 One cannot be absolutely sure if Gregory was using Plutarch here as a direct source, since he doesn’t mention him by name. However, according to this statement, he

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170 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, x.
178 “Pythagoras, as it seems, was greatly admired, and he also greatly admired the Egyptian priests, and, copying their symbolism and occult teachings, incorporated his doctrines in enigmas.” Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris. Moralia*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, Cambridge, MA 1936, section 10.
did not approve of mixing Neopythagorean interpretations of Egyptian enigmas with Christian doctrines.

Aristotle explained the relation of words and symbols in his work *On Interpretation*: “Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols (symbola) of spoken words.”

With words we point to an object or a phenomenon that we perceive through our senses and form ideas and concepts through our experience. The word then becomes a sign for the actual phenomenon or object that we are thinking of. By the means of speech or thought, we cannot fully grasp the true essence of things; we can only point to them. In a metaphysical allegory presented in his work *Answer to Eunomius’ Second Book*, Gregory of Nyssa saw Abraham as a man who purified his mind of all concepts and attributes of God, so that his faith was pure from error. God transcends any knowable symbol, and therefore God cannot be fully depicted by any attribute, word or concept. This allegory, having an echo of Aristotle, was Gregory’s apophatic criticism against Eunomius’s claim that God can be fully known or depicted by attributes. Gregory seems to rely here on Aristotelian background in his apophaticism.

The symbolical method of interpretation was applied extensively by Hellenistic Jewish philosophers Aristobulus (flourished 2nd century B.C.) and Philo (c. 20 B.C.–50 A.D.). Philo’s method of interpretation may well be described as symbolic exegesis with two senses: literal and symbolic. The twofold method of Philo is different from the allegorical method of the Stoics, since for the Stoics, it was only the allegories that were speaking about the truth, not the narrative itself. Stoic allegory was based on a belief that the poets had unwillingly and unknowingly passed on wisdom from an earlier stage in history. In Philo’s model, however, the literal sense of the Torah also presents true historical events.

The most common word indicating a hidden meaning in Philo’s vocabulary is *symbolon*; other words are also common, such as *allegoria*, *hyponoia*, *ainigma*, and *metaphora*. *Typos* appears also, but not in the Christian context of typology, but always in the meaning of a pattern or a model. All these terms mentioned here were also known and applied by Gregory of Nyssa.

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For Philo, in addition to the literal meaning, every word of the Scriptures also has a hidden meaning that could be discovered with allegorical interpretation. Numbers, light and darkness, animals, objects, and people are all treated as symbols in Philo’s exegesis.¹⁸³ For Gregory, on the other hand, not all words or passages necessarily have a hidden meaning, since the literal sense may already contain an interpretation of a passage, or a prophecy, which contains the hidden meaning.

Philo saw Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as symbols of virtue.¹⁸⁴ This thinking is evident also in Gregory of Nyssa’s interpretation. Gregory saw the lives of patriarchs Moses and Abraham as well as important Christians, such as Macrina and Basil, models of virtue that must be imitated by devoted Christians. The idea of seeing important figures of Biblical narratives as models of virtue originates in Philo.

Philo attempted to build a bridge between Greek philosophy and the Scriptures. He was concerned that the Scriptures were becoming mere ethical guidelines among many Hellenistic ethical writings. Philo did the same for the Scriptures as the Stoics and Neoplatonists did for Homeric myths: he sought for allegorical meanings and explanations for passages that appeared to be in some way problematic, irrational, or immoral.¹⁸⁵ For the Stoics, the anthropomorphic elements in the stories about Greek gods were irrational and therefore the literal sense of interpretation was for them pure fiction when it comes to true knowledge. The allegorical method applied by the Stoics in order to explain this kind of problems in relation to the Homeric literature. For the Stoics, the first humans were living in harmony with nature and had exquisite knowledge of the world. This knowledge had already been lost during the times of Homer and Hesiod, but it was still possible to see traces of this knowledge in the writings of the great poets. This knowledge could only be traced by the etymological interpretation of the divine names of Greek deities.¹⁸⁶ Etymological analysis was also applied by Philo. However, Philo’s etymological interpretation was based on the Hebrew names of people and the names of geographical locations, not the names of Greek gods.

¹⁸⁴ Philo of Alexandria, On Abraham, 11.52.
gods as for the Stoics. Philo found similar kind of problems in the Torah as the Stoics did in the Homeric writings, such as anthropomorphic expressions of God. According to Philo, literal interpretations of anthropomorphic passages lead to impiety; therefore a hidden meaning should be discovered instead. Expressions that contradict the true nature of God were not meant to be taken literally. This notion towards anthropomorphisms in Biblical narratives was later adopted by Origen and Gregory.

It must be noted that Philo’s exegesis was not original, but it was rooted in the earlier exegetical tradition of the Hellenistic Jewish philosophers of Alexandria. Unfortunately, only a few examples of the allegorical exegesis from this period have survived. Philo was influenced by another Alexandrian philosopher, Aristobulus of Paneas, who lived in the first half of second century B.C. In the fragments of Eusebius, Aristobulus states that allegorical interpretation is needed to avoid anthropomorphic ideas on the nature of God. Moses used “words that refer to other things” when he was trying to depict the nature of the divine realm. This is something that those who “cling to the letter” will not understand, for they are unable to see anything elevated in the Scriptures. When Moses was speaking about the hand of God, he is actually speaking symbolically about divine powers.

According to Aristobulus, Greek philosophers, such as Pythagoras, Plato and Socrates, took their ideas about the divine from the Jews and adapted those ideas to their own philosophical thought. Similar opinion about the Greek philosophers borrowing their ideas from the Jews appears much later in the writings of Clement of Alexandria. Clement justified the use of Greek philosophy as a vehicle for Christian thought by claiming that the Greeks had adopted their doctrines from the Hebrews. Clement applied Philo’s allegorical methods to Christian exegesis; he even borrowed some of Philo’s allegorical interpretations in his own treatises. Gregory doesn’t mention Clement as his

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Therefore, it is difficult to say whether Gregory knew Clement’s original writings.

Clement of Alexandria had a special interest in symbols and enigmas. He dedicated entire chapters in the 5th book of his Stroma to Jewish (5.4), Greek (5.5, 5.8, 5.9) and Egyptian (5.7) symbolism. He discusses the Greek and Egyptian methods of concealing sacred truths in enigmas and symbols, comparing them with the Hebrew conception of the ‘veil’, citing several biblical passages containing symbolism, parables, dark sayings or metaphors. According to Clement, those people who do not understand the method of concealment are “blind”, “disordered and material”, whereas the contemplative soul is “undazzled” and has “keen vision” for hidden meanings and symbols. Clement adopted Philo’s symbolical exegesis and even quoted Philo’s symbolic interpretations straight in his Stroma.

It is difficult to say about the possible influence of Clement in Gregory’s thought, since Gregory doesn’t mention his name in his writings. Both Clement and Gregory were using Philo as a source in their exegesis of the Pentateuch. It must be noted, though, that Gregory did not reproduce Philo’s etymological symbols as Clement did.

2.7. Anagoge – Origen’s Anagogical Interpretation and Its Opponents
It was Clement’s student, Origen of Alexandria, who, through his writings, became a major influence on Gregory’s whole family. The Alexandrian exegete wrote allegorical commentaries on several books of the Holy Scriptures. Due to his knowledge of Hebrew, he was able to read the Hebrew Scriptures in their original. For this reason Origen knew Rabbinic exegetical works fairly well and cited them in his writings.197

His knowledge of the Hebrew language and culture made his exegesis of the Old Testament different from other Christian exegetes. His exegesis is rich in etymological interpretation of Hebrew words, for example the names of geographical locations. Origen’s method of etymological analysis is reminiscent of the etymological interpretation of the Stoics; however, Origen’s

195 Ann Conway-Jones, Gregory of Nyssa’s Tabernacle Imagery, 69.
196 Ilaria Ramelli, ‘Philo as Origen’s Declared Model’, 3.
197 See further on Origen’s etymological analysis on the locations of the desert in the 5th Homily on Exodus, and the 27th Homily on Numbers; Ilaria Ramelli, ‘Philo as Origen’s Declared Model’, 12.
interpretations differ since he was interpreting Biblical passages and did not approve physical allegory, but was instead looking for a moral or a spiritual meaning. Origen stated himself that Hellenistic Jewish exegetes, such as Philo and Aristobulus, were his primary influences on his exegesis.199

Origen presents his threefold model of interpreting Scripture in his work *On the First Principle*:

The individual ought, then, to portray the ideas of holy Scripture in a threefold manner upon his own soul; in order that the simple man may be edified by the “flesh,” as it were, of the Scripture, for so we name the obvious sense; while he who has ascended a certain way (may be edified) by the “soul,” as it were. The perfect man, again, and he who resembles those spoken of by the apostle, when he says, “We speak wisdom among them that are perfect, but not the wisdom of the world, nor of the rulers of this world, who come to nought; but we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God hath ordained before the ages, unto our glory,”200 (may receive edification) from the spiritual law, which has a shadow of good things to come.201 For as man consists of body, and soul, and spirit, so in the same way does Scripture, which has been arranged to be given by God for the salvation of men.202

The allegorical model presented by Origen here is threefold:

1. “Body” or “flesh”; literal sense for beginners,
2. “Soul”; moral sense for intermediate audience, and
3. “Spirit”; spiritual sense for an audience aiming for perfection.203

Origen presents another threefold division in his *Homilies on Numbers* in the interpretation of the almonds of Aaron’s rod (Num. 17:8), which represent three layers of the interpretation of Mosaic Law:

1. Literal sense; the bitterness of the first layer of the almond. Prescribes circumcision, commands sacrifices, “the letter that kills”.
2. Moral sense; the protective covering of the shell. Moral teaching, self-control, abstinence from food, chastisement of the body.

201 Here Origen refers to Hebr. 10:1 "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves.", NIV 2011.
(3.) Spiritual sense; the hidden and concealed meaning of the Law.

Represents the priestly fruit that feeds and nourishes the one who eats it.\textsuperscript{204}

Gregory of Nyssa presents a twofold interpretation of the almond in \textit{The Life of Moses} as well. For Gregory, the almond represents priesthood, as it also did for Origen. The tough and dried outer shell of the almond represents the self-controlled life of a priest and purification of the passion of self-indulgence. The inner fruit of the almond represents the hidden and the invisible life that has been brought to a state of ripeness. Gregory doesn’t present the almond as a symbol of interpretation of the Law as Origen did, but rather as an ascetical model.\textsuperscript{205} Gregory’s interpretation is reminiscent of Philo, who saw the almond as an aschetical model as well (\textit{symbolon asketikes psyches}).\textsuperscript{206}

Origen states that the threefold model should be applied through the whole corpus of the Scriptures.\textsuperscript{207} However, he doesn’t apply this model systematically himself. Frances M. Young has argued that, while Origen presents an ideal threefold model of interpretation, he applies a twofold model in practice:

(1.) The ‘letter’ of the text, and

(2.) Multiple possible meanings (prophetic, moral, or spiritual interpretation, or \textit{typos}).\textsuperscript{208}

The moral sense is included not as a separate step, but as one alternative among many other methods of interpretation. The twofold method of interpretation is certainly more practical, since not all Biblical passages necessarily contain a moral meaning. Origen also presents a twofold model of interpretation in his \textit{Homilies on Numbers}:

First, let us understand the things that are reported according to the letter, and then, with the Lord assisting, let us ascend (\textit{adscendemus}) from the understanding of the letter to the understanding of the Spirit.\textsuperscript{209}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{204} Origen, \textit{Homilies on Numbers}, ed. Christopher A. Hall, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, Downers Grove, IL 2009, 9.7.4.
  \item \textsuperscript{205} Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{The Life of Moses}, 2.285.
  \item \textsuperscript{206} Philo of Alexandria, \textit{On the Life of Moses}, trans. C. D. Yonge, (34) 183.
  \item \textsuperscript{207} Origen, \textit{Homilies on Numbers}, trans. T. P. Scheck, 9.7.3.
  \item \textsuperscript{208} Frances M. Young, ‘Interpretation of Scripture’, in S. A. Harvey & D. G. Hunter (eds), \textit{The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies}, Oxford 2008, 7.
  \item \textsuperscript{209} Origen, \textit{Homilies on Numbers}, trans. T. P. Scheck, 5.1.1.
\end{itemize}
Here Origen presents a twofold model of interpretation. Origen stresses that the interpreter is ascending here towards higher levels of contemplation. With the assistance of the Lord, a higher meaning is revealed to the interpreter. This is an example of Origen’s anagogical approach of ‘lifting up’ from the level of understanding of the letter (adscendere, ‘climb up’, ‘rise’) to the understanding of the Spirit. According to Manlio Simonetti, it was Origen who brought the term anagoge into Christian exegesis. Gregory adopted the concept of anagogy from Origen and used the term extensively.

In his work *On the Contemplative Life*, Philo described the life of the Therapeutae, a Hellenistic Jewish group of ascetics that flourished in the 1st century A.D. Philo describes the method of allegorical interpretation of the Therapeutae as follows:

And these explanations (exegeseis) of the sacred scriptures are delivered by mystic expressions (hyponoion) in allegories (allegoriais), for the whole of the law appears to these men to resemble a living animal, and its express commandments seem to be the body, and the invisible meaning (lexesin aoraton) concealed under and lying beneath the plain words resembles the soul, in which the rational soul begins most excellently to contemplate (theorein) what belongs to itself, as in a mirror, beholding in these very words the exceeding beauty of the sentiments, and unfolding and explaining the symbols (symbola), and bringing the secret meaning naked to the light to all who are able by the light of a slight intimation to perceive (theorein) what is unseen by what is visible.

The method of the Therapeutae described here seems to serve as a model of interpretation for Philo, which is apparently twofold. The body represents the literal commandments (rhetas taxeis) of the Mosaic Law, and the soul represents the underlying meanings of the text (hyponoion ev allegoriais, symbola), which are revealed by the interpreter in contemplation (theoria). Contemplation is here described in a Platonic manner as beholding the exceeding Beauty. Philo’s description resembles Gregory’s interpretation of the uplifted hands of Moses signifying the higher interpretation of the Law in *The Life of Moses*.

Ilaria Ramelli considers Philo’s description as a parallel in comparison with Origen’s model presented in the 4th book of *On the First Principle*. However, there are differences between these models. The literal sense is described in a similar manner between the two authors. However, in Philo’s description, the soul

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210 ibid. 5.1.1–2.
represents the spiritual sense, while in Origen’s model the soul represents the
moral sense.\textsuperscript{214}

Origen, referring to Paul (1. Cor. 2:6–7), advises that the spiritual sense was
meant for the edification of “the perfect man”, which indicates quite clearly that
the spiritual sense was not taught for beginners; the hidden meanings were taught
to people who were seen to be mature enough to receive wisdom of this nature, in
other words, to people that were aiming for ‘perfection’. Origen admitted the
limits of the human understanding; not all the hidden meanings could be traced or
understood. He also admitted the limitations of words, which were for him earthly
and unpolished vessels that contain a treasure within.\textsuperscript{215} The words of the Holy
Scriptures have two aspects: the earthly and the divine. If one sticks only to the
earthly aspect of the words, the divine message cannot be conveyed. The
interpreter must realise this to avoid misunderstandings and erroneous opinions.\textsuperscript{216}
Origen advises on the same topic in the 5\textsuperscript{th} Homily on Numbers as follows:

> Of course this person to whom these things are revealed and to whom these
things are believed to be examined spiritually should know that it is not safe for him to disclose these things and to make them accessible to those to whom it is not allowed to be given access. Instead, he should cover up each of these things and hand over each of these things covered up, to be carried on the shoulders and placed on the necks of others who are less capable.\textsuperscript{217}

Here Origen advises that it is not advisable to teach the spiritual sense to
beginners, but that they ought to be revealed only to experienced believers.

Some of the interpreters, according to Origen, who do not understand the
spiritual sense of Scripture, fall into heresies. Origen accused Jewish interpreters
for applying literal interpretations to passages that should have been interpreted
allegorically.\textsuperscript{218} However, as Ramelli has noted, Origen repeatedly denounces the
literal meaning as “Jewish” as many other Christian exegesis, Philo and Aristobulus, were
Jewish exegesis. There were in fact several Christian exegesis that were opposing
Origen’s allegory, who Origen considered to be his opponents.\textsuperscript{220}

Among them were the Marcionites, the followers of Marcion, who rejected
the use of allegory, as well as the whole corpus of the Old Testament, and

\textsuperscript{214}Ilaria Ramelli, ‘Philo as Origen’s Declared Model’, 8, 12.
\textsuperscript{215}Here Origen refers to 2. Cor. 4:7
\textsuperscript{216}Origen of Alexandria, \textit{De principiis}, 4.1.7–8.
\textsuperscript{217}Origen, \textit{Homilies on Numbers}, trans. T. P. Scheck, 5.1.2.
\textsuperscript{218}ibid. 4.1.8.
\textsuperscript{219}Ilaria Ramelli, ‘Philo as Origen’s Declared Model’, 12.
\textsuperscript{220}ibid. 13.
accepted only the teachings of the Gospels and Paul, claiming that the God of the Hebrew Scriptures had nothing to do with the God that Jesus was preaching.\textsuperscript{221} Origen argued that the Marcionites had rejected the God of the Hebrews because they were interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures merely in a literal way and did not understand the spiritual sense of Scripture.\textsuperscript{222}

Origen had critics also among the Platonists of his time. Origen’s \textit{Contra Celsum}, written in 178 A.D, was an apologetical work directed as a response to Greek philosopher Celsus’s criticism of the Scriptures. Celsus’s criticism is presented in the work \textit{True Doctrine}, which was, according to Scarborough, “written more than three-quarters of a century before Ambrose brought the work to Origen's attention.” The aim of Celsus’s work was to persuade Christians to abandon their religion and to attend public ceremonies of traditional worship of the gods.\textsuperscript{223}

The most relevant aspect of Celsus’s criticism in this study is the criticism towards Jewish and Christian allegory of Scripture. Origen presents two citations of Celsus in \textit{Contra Celsum}:

(1) “The more modest of Jewish and Christian writers give all these things an allegorical meaning;”
(2) “Because they are ashamed of these things, they take refuge in allegory.”\textsuperscript{224}

Celsus criticises here the exegetical method of the Jewish and Christian interpreters who seek allegorical meanings for problematic scriptural passages. Origen answers to Celsus’s criticism by saying that “Celsus fundamentally misreads the prophets, mistaking the literal sense of their proclamations for the sole meaning of the text.”\textsuperscript{225}

Another tenacious critic of Origen’s exegesis and the Christians in general, Porphyry, was in fact a former student of Origen. He studied the Scriptures and Alexandrian allegorical method of exegesis in Caesarea, but later rejected the method. He studied philosophy under Longinus and Plotinus, and became the

\textsuperscript{222} Ilaria Ramelli, ‘Philo as Origen’s Declared Model’, 16.
\textsuperscript{223} Jason M. Scarborough, ‘Origen and Celsus: Exegesis and Apologetics’, 48–49.
\textsuperscript{224} Origen, \textit{Against Celsus}, Trans. Frederick Crombie, 4.48.
\textsuperscript{225} Jason M. Scarborough, ‘Origen and Celsus: Exegesis and Apologetics’, 53.
supervisor of the Neoplatonic school of philosophy in Rome. In his treatise *Against the Christians*, Porphyry presents his criticism of Christian exegesis. Porphyry rejected the Jewish writings, seeing them as ‘deprived’ and ‘barbaric’. He noted that some Christians were seeking for solutions to find a way of interpreting the scriptures allegorically:

> For they boast that the plain words of Moses are enigmas, and regard them as oracles full of hidden mysteries; and having bewildered the mental judgment by folly, they make their explanations.

As we can see in this description, the main target of Porphyry’s criticism was Origen’s allegorical interpretation of the Book of Exodus and his attempt to find hidden meanings in it. Porphyry accused Origen of applying Stoic allegorical methods on barbaric writings of the Jews. Origen defended his methods by stating that he owed his allegorical methods to the Jews, such as Philo and Aristubulus, among others.

Porphyry rejected the Scriptures as a valid source, but did not reject allegory as a method of interpretation. He saw Homeric myths and the rites of Greek religion as enigmas and symbols that enabled him to form his metaphysical system. Porphyry presents his own symbolical interpretation of a Homeric myth from the 13th book of *Odyssey* in his work *The Cave of the Nymph*. Porphyry’s Homeric symbolism is based on the interpretations of Greek philosophers Numenius and Chronius, as well as Plato. Porphyry presents the basis of Chronius’s symbolism as follows:

> "Cronius, therefore, having premised thus much, says that it is evident, not only to the wise but also to the vulgar, that the poet (Homer), under the veil of allegory, conceals some mysterious significations;"

Although Origen used allegorical methods in scriptural interpretation extensively, it cannot be said that he disregarded the literal sense. He thought that...

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229 Ilaria Ramelli, ‘Philo as Origen’s Declared Model’, 12.
231 Homer, *The Odyssey*, 13.3.
233 ibid. chapters 3, 7, 11, 13, 17.
234 ibid. chapter 1.
the allegorical interpretations must not contradict the literal/historical sense of Scripture. He admitted that there are some passages that couldn’t be interpreted literally or historically, for in these cases the outcome would be absurd or impossible.

…there are certain passages of Scripture where this “body,” as we termed it, i.e., this inferential historical sense, is not always found, as we shall prove to be the case in the following pages, but where that which we termed “soul” or “spirit” can only be understood.\(^{235}\)

However, according to Origen, these cases are very few.\(^{236}\)

Origen wrote substantial amount of criticism towards those who rejected allegory, but he also criticised Valentinian interpreters, whose allegories, according to him, were contradicting with the literal/historical sense of Scripture. Origen accused the Valentinians of breaking the natural sequence of the biblical narrative. Origen, the relentless seeker of order and structure in the Scriptures, thought that the allegorical details were supposed to follow a logical sequence (\textit{akolouthia}) and form a unified system of cause and effect.\(^{237}\) This concept was also a key element in Gregory’s exegesis, as I am going to show in chapter 4.

The main target of Origen’s criticism against the Valentinians was Heracleon, a notable leader of the Western branch of Valentinian Christianity in the second century A.D.\(^{238}\) He was according to Clement of Alexandria “the most distinguished of the school of Valentinians”.\(^{239}\) According to Origen, Heracleon personally knew Valentinus, the famous leader of the branch.\(^{240}\) Jean Mouson attests that the valentinians were applying a twofold method of exegesis (1. literal, 2. spiritual). The literal sense of the Valentinians is limited to the cosmos or the corporeal realm, while the spiritual sense concerns the transcendent world beyond the cosmos. It seems that it was not Heracleon’s model of interpretation itself that was under criticism of Origen, but Heracleon’s view of the nature of the spiritual realm, which leads Heracleon into different allegorical conclusions.\(^{241}\)

In this chapter I intended to show how dependent Gregory actually is on the Alexandrian tradition of exegesis. Gregory uses similar terminology for the


\(^{236}\) Ilaria Ramelli, ‘Philo as Origen’s Declared Model’, 11.

\(^{237}\) ibid. 9.


\(^{239}\) Clement of Alexandria, \textit{The Stromata, or Miscellanies}, trans. William Wilson, 4.9.


spiritual sense as do Philo and Origen, and presents both twofold and threefold models of exegesis as Origen did before him. A personal characteristic of Gregory’s exegesis is that he was giving Alexandrian exegetical ideas, interpretations and models a different purpose. The absence, or rejection of etymological interpretation makes Gregory’s exegesis different in comparison with the Alexandrians.

2.8. Allegoria and Typos – Gregory of Nyssa’s Apology on Allegory

As already earlier noted, Gregory of Nyssa’s allegorical exegesis is indebted to the Alexandrian tradition of Philo and Origen. The family of Gregory was introduced to Origen’s thought through Macrina the Elder, and through Gregory Thaumaturgus, who was Origen’s disciple. The books of the Alexandrian masters Philo and Origen as well as classics of Greek philosophy were available in Gregory’s family library.\(^{242}\) It was Gregory who remained the most devoted follower of Origen’s tradition in the family. Gregory’s brother Basil was at first a follower of Origen, but later criticised Origen’s allegorical method of exegesis.\(^{243}\)

Gregory of Nyssa presents his apology on the use of Alexandrian method of allegorical interpretation in the beginning of his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*.

It seems right to some church leaders, however, to stand by the letter of the Holy Scriptures in all circumstances, and they do not agree that Scripture says anything for our profit by way of enigmas (*ainigmaton*) and below-the-surface meanings (*hyponoion*).\(^{244}\)

Gregory however does not mention these church leaders by name, which makes it harder to pinpoint for whom this criticism was meant. Roland Heine suggests that the most probable names behind Gregory’s criticism would be the exegetes of the Antiochene school, who were Origen’s opponents.\(^{245}\) The most important representatives of the Antiochene school of exegesis were Diodore of Tarsus (c. 330–c. 390), and his pupils Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428), and John Chrysostom (354–407). The Antiochene exegetes rejected allegory as a proper method of exegesis, arguing that the allegorists corrupt the historical sense of Scripture. Biblical interpretation has to be faithful to the literal meaning of the text and not bring any concepts outside of the context. According to the Antiochene


\(^{244}\) Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 30.


\(^{245}\) Roland E. Heine, ‘Gregory of Nyssa’s Apology for Allegory’, 366.
exegetes, the Alexandrians were perverting the original meaning of Biblical passages with their own “fantasies” by calling them allegory. Allegorical exegesis practiced by Origen was indebted to Philo’s method of exegesis, which according to the Antiochenes had a pagan origin. Therefore allegory was not a proper method for a Christian use, since Christian Scriptures are not false myths which need explanation.

Gregory of Nyssa justifies his use of Alexandrian allegorical methods by Scripture in a very similar manner to what Origen had done earlier. He cites Proverbs 1:6, “To understand a parable (parabolen) and the interpretation; the words of the wise and their enigmas (ainigmata)” stating that the Scriptures themselves testify that they contain parables, dark sayings and enigmas. Gregory used the parables of Jesus presented in the Gospels as an example in his defense on allegory. For Gregory, the parables of Jesus are an example of “instances in which something is conveyed by the obvious sense (literal sense) but something else is indicated by the intelligible meaning (spiritual sense) of what is said.” Gregory bases his twofold method of exegesis in examples found in the Scriptures.

Gregory also argues that Paul the Apostle himself used allegorical interpretation. The verse under dispute among the exegetes was Gal. 4:24, “Now this is an allegory (allegoroumena): these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children from slavery.” Paul is using here the verb allegoroumena, which seems to be one of the main points of controversy. John Chrysostom criticised Paul’s choice of terminology on Gal. 4:24, arguing that what Paul called an allegory was actually a type (typos). Theodore of Mopsuestia, on the other hand, argued that Paul actually meant theoría when he was using the verb allegoroumena. It seems that the Antiochene exegetes had a problem with Paul’s choice of words and wished that

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250 ibid. 7, 9.
251 Gal. 4:24 “Now this is being said as an allegory (allegoroumena), for these women represent two covenants. The one woman, Hagar, is from Mount Sinai, and her children are born into slavery.” ISV 2012.
he would have chosen another more appropriate term, for the word *allegoria* was pointing to the way of interpretation that the Greek philosophers were using.\footnote{253} 

Gregory encourages people to “discover a meaning higher than that of the surface sense”, and lead their minds “upward in the direction of something more divine and incorporeal.” Here Gregory connects Platonic contemplation, i.e. the ascent from the corporeal level (literal sense) to the incorporeal (spiritual sense), with interpretation of Scripture. Also Gregory’s method is indebted to Origen’s twofold anagogical model. For Gregory, interpreting Scripture on a higher level is a necessity; he compares exegesis without spiritual interpretation as offering unprepared grain to people to eat instead of a finished produce of bread. Gregory states that one can call spiritual interpretation (*anagogen theorion*) “as tropology (*tropologist*) or allegory (*allegorian*) or by some other name”; this seems to be Gregory’s answer to the criticism on terminology by the Antiochene exegetes. Gregory doesn’t want to quarrel about terminology, but more important is the thought being conveyed by interpretation.\footnote{254} He is reluctant to make clear definitions of the different terminology he is applying. However, Gregory’s preface shows that he was well aware of the terminology used by his predecessors.

The Antiochene method of interpretation is clearly explained in Diodore of Tarsus’s *Commentary on Psalms*. The method appears to be twofold: the historical/literal sense (*historia/lexis*) and the anagogical sense (*anagoge*). There is a striking similarity with the model given by Diodore with Origen’s anagogical model. My conclusion is that the criticism of Diodore against the allegorists is not directed towards the Alexandrian twofold model itself, since they were applying a similar model themselves. The Antiochenes saw that some passages contained higher meaning as well, although their exegesis had more emphasis on explaining the literal sense. The primary aim of their exegesis was to provide the kind of interpretation that makes the original Biblical narrative understandable for the reader, whereas the aim of the Alexandrians was bringing the higher meanings into light. Perhaps the biggest difference between these two schools was that Alexandrian exegesis concentrated on metaphysical allegories, whereas Antiochene exegesis was almost completely lacking on philosophical arguments.\footnote{255}

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{253} Dennis Brown, *A Study in the Biblical Exegesis of Saint Jerome*, 19.
\item \footnote{254} Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies of the Song of Songs*, trans. Richard A. Norris, 3–6, 9, 11.
\end{itemize}
Diodore gives an example of his anagogical interpretation by comparing Cain and Abel with the Jewish synagogue and the Church. Cain is a type of the synagogue, for the synagogue is “flawed” in the same way as Cain’s sacrifice. Abel, on the other hand, offered an unblemished lamb to the Lord according to the law, which is a type (typos) of the acceptable gifts of the Church. This interpretation of Abel as a type of Christ is based on earlier interpretations of Melito of Sardis, Irenaeus and Tertullian.

This kind of exegesis of the Antiochene school has been often defined as typology. However, as Frances Young has rightly noted, one must keep in mind that typology is a modern term; it was not known by the ancients. The term familiar to both Alexandrian and Antiochene exegetes is typos (type). As one can see in the example of Diodore, types were often used by the Fathers as a way to prove Christian victory over Judaism, and that Christians are now the chosen people of God. “Evil” or misfortuned characters of Biblical narratives, such as Cain or Judas, were put to represent the synagogue, whereas “good” characters represented Christians.

Surprisingly, one of the followers of Gregory’s symbolic sequence of the Exodus narrative is Antiochene exegete Theodoret of Cyrrhus, the pupil of Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia. Both Diodore and Theodore were condemned as heretical by later Christian Councils. However, their successor Theodoret of Cyrrhus avoided condemnation; his work Questions on Exodus gives us an opportunity to make a comparison with Gregory of Nyssa’s and Origen’s interpretations of Exodus.

First of all, Theodoret saw Moses as a type of Christ in accordance with the patristic tradition. According to his interpretation of the angel of the burning bush, “it was not God the Father who appeared to Moses” nor angel as “a subordinate minister”, but the word ‘angel’ was “to indicate the person of the Only-begotten”, who “became man and occupied the virgin’s womb”, and “would preserve her maidenhood from defilement.” Like Gregory did before him, Theodoret correlates the narrative of the burning bush with Christ’s incarnation and the miraculous

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preserving of Mary’s virginity.\textsuperscript{260} Moses stretching out his hands in the war of Amalek represents for Theodoret “a type of him who was crucified for us”, which reminiscent to Gregory’s interpretation of the stretching out of Moses’s hands as a type of the cross of Jesus.\textsuperscript{261} A good example of Antiochene typology is Theodoret’s interpretation on 1. Cor. 10:2–4 in Question 27:

The old was a type of the new, the Law of Moses a shadow, grace the body. As the Egyptians pursued the Hebrews, and, by crossing the Red Sea, the Hebrews were freed from the harsh domination of the Egyptians, the sea represents, in typological terms, the baptismal font, the cloud the Spirit, Moses Christ the Savior, the rod the cross, Pharaoh the devil, the Egyptians the demons, the manna the divine nourishment, and the water from the rock the saving blood. After the crossing of the Red Sea, the ancients enjoyed the novel food and miraculous spring; just so, after saving baptism, we partake of the sacred Eucharist.\textsuperscript{262}

Here Theodoret interprets the rod of Moses as a type of the cross\textsuperscript{263} and manna as divine nourishment,\textsuperscript{264} which are in line with Gregory. Theodoret follows Origen’s line when he sees the Egyptian soldiers representing demons (and not the passions as Gregory does), and Pharaoh as the devil.\textsuperscript{265} It is obvious that when it comes to exegesis of Exodus, Theodoret’s symbolical interpretations are influenced by types of Alexandrian tradition. Robert C. Hill states: “This is not the sort of allegory the Antiochenes attributed to Origen, because Theodoret still gives predominant attention to the literal sense, which is not subsumed into a spiritual interpretation.”\textsuperscript{266} My question therefore would be: who would be the source of Theodoret’s pattern of types presented here if not Paul, Origen and Gregory? Theodoret’s typology as such does not really differ much in comparison to the Alexandrian tradition. The difference between Theodoret’s anagogy and Alexandrian anagogy is that Theodoret sees the details of the Exodus narrative

\textsuperscript{260} “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.” Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{The Life of Moses}, trans. A. J. Malherbe & E. Ferguson, 2.21.


\textsuperscript{263} “…you of course understand the "cross" when you hear "wood"” Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{The Life of Moses}, trans. A. J. Malherbe & E. Ferguson, 2.132.

\textsuperscript{264} “For how could something incorporeal be nourishment to a body? Neither ploughing nor sowing produced the body of this bread, but the earth which remained unchanged was found full of this divine food, of which the hungry partake.” ibid. 2.139.


only as types and does not make any philosophical or metaphysical interpretations based on the details.

2.9. The Reception of Patristic Allegorical Exegesis in the West
Despite its opposition, allegorical exegesis spread to the Western Church through Augustine of Hippo (354–430 A.D.).\(^{267}\) He adopted the method as a young man from Ambrose of Milan (340–397 A.D.), who was deeply influenced by Philo’s allegorical method.\(^{268}\) As noted by Augustine, the method was applied by Ambrose especially for interpreting the Old Testament. In comparison with the Alexandrians, Augustine’s interpretation has more emphasis on the literal sense of the text.\(^{269}\)

Allegorical interpretation, especially considering the Old Testament, became the norm in the Middle Ages as well. The normative medieval model of interpretation was fourfold, as de Lubac has shown: 1. historical, 2. tropological (moral), 3. allegorical, and 4. anagogical (spiritual).\(^{270}\) It was extensively applied by Thomas Aquinas.\(^{271}\) The allegorical method of Aquinas was more systematic and had more emphasis on the historical sense in comparison with Origen.\(^{272}\) Aquinas’s model turned the emphasis of Biblical interpretation towards the plain literal sense.\(^{273}\) Origen and Gregory both certainly were aware of and applied all four senses presented in Aquinas’s model. However, they were not applying it as a consistent systematic model, but rather freely. An important matter is to realise how the terminology applied by the Church Fathers differs from the medieval or modern context. The historical sense, historia, was merely pointing to the plain sense of the original text, and was not meant to be an attempt to reconstruct the actual structure of events behind the text, as a modern historian would try to do.\(^{274}\) It is also good to take into account that tropologia, the tropological sense, often used by Origen, did not signify moral sense as in de Lubac’s medieval model, but had the definition of figurative sense in the patristic context, being more or less


\(^{268}\) Craig Alan Satterlee, *Ambrose of Milan’s Method of Mystagogical Preaching*, Collegeville, Minnesota, 100.


\(^{271}\) Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologicae*, Q1A10, 1st part.


synonymous with allegorical sense. This was also Gregory’s notion of tropologia.\textsuperscript{275}

Martin Luther’s criticism of allegory is a turning point in the history of Biblical hermeneutics. Luther, with his principles of sola scriptura and solus sensus litteralis, emphasized the literal sense in Biblical interpretation, and rejected the medieval fourfold method of interpretation. Oswald Bayer sees Luther’s exegesis as a contrast to Gregory of Nyssa’s allegorical exegesis.\textsuperscript{276} However, Luther did not stop using allegory completely, but was applying it especially in the early years of his life. He criticised the kind of allegory that was deliberately meant to change the original meaning of the text to suit the interpreter’s own position. Luther accepted the use of allegory only “when Scripture itself intends the allegory”.\textsuperscript{277}

Luther added brief allegories almost for every chapter in his early work \textit{Lectures on Deuteronomy} to show proper usages of allegory. He warned against the allegorical exegesis of Jerome, Origen, and “the whole Alexandrian school, which the Jew Philo extols”.\textsuperscript{278} However, one can also see similarities between Luther’s interpretations and the symbolic exegesis of Origen of the book of Exodus. Luther defines the Pharaoh’s kingdom in Egypt as a foreshadow to the earthly kingdom, a place of disobedience and sin ruled by the devil, “the prince of this world”, based on John 16:11. This resembles Origen’s allegorical interpretation of the Pharaoh as an emblem of the devil, and Pharaoh’s kingdom in Egypt as a symbol of this world.\textsuperscript{279}

Furthermore, Luther provided an allegorical interpretation of the Ladder of Jacob. For Luther, ladder is a picture or an image, which signifies Christ descending to hell and ascending to heaven, being “God and man, the highest and the lowest, infinite and finite in one Person…” The ladder also signified for Luther the union between Christ and the believer through the Word and the sacraments. Luther’s interpretation creates a bridge with Gregory of Nyssa’s

\textsuperscript{276} Oswald Bauer, \textit{Martin Luther’s Theology. A Contemporary Interpretation}, Cambridge 2008, 80.
\textsuperscript{278} Martin Luther, \textit{Lectures on Deuteronomy. Luther’s Works}, vol. 9, trans. Richard R. Caemmerer, WA 14, 500, 560, 7–8, 24–25.
\textsuperscript{279} Albert C. Geljon, \textit{Philonic Exegesis}, 101–102; Martin Luther, \textit{Auslegung deutsch des Vaterunters für die einfältigen Laien}, WA 2, 1519, 96–97; LW 42, 38–39.
exegesis, since Gregory was the first among the Christian Fathers who defined God as infinite, and therefore came into the conclusion that there are infinite amount of rungs in the top of Jacob’s divine ladder.\textsuperscript{280}

As Luther before him, Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) rejected allegorization as a source of knowledge in Biblical hermeneutics. Spinoza went even further than Luther towards a more modern approach of Biblical interpretation: the Bible was a literary document that should be studied with the same principles as any other kind of literary data. Spinoza called for the use of empirical methods of geography and ethnology in Biblical study. He emphasized the use of Hebrew, the original language of the source material, in the study of the Old Testament. Spinoza’s predecessor in this approach would be Origen, who knew Hebrew and was reading the Old Testament in the original language. He also denied the assumption that Moses would have written the Pentateuch himself.\textsuperscript{281}

Luther’s and Spinoza’s rejection of allegory led the way for protestant criticism towards allegorical interpretation of the Church Fathers. An example of this is Johann Georg Rosenmüller’s (1736–1815) \textit{Historia interpretationis librorum sacrorum in Ecclesia Christiana}.\textsuperscript{282} According to Rosenmüller, the Church Fathers completely abandoned history in the Biblical interpretation by systematically changing the meaning of the words of the original text with their allegories. He argued that, in the interpretation of the Old Testament, the Fathers were mixing philosophical arguments of Plato, Plutarch, Heraclitus, and Philo with the accounts of Moses. Apostle Paul’s allegorizing was a plain embarrassment for Rosenmüller.\textsuperscript{283} As one can see here, in the period of Enlightenment, allegory was no longer accepted as a legitimate tool of exegesis, but it did however continue as a form of writing.\textsuperscript{284}

In the middle of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, Patrick Fairbairn provided only a very brief chapter about the exegesis of the Church Fathers in his work \textit{The Typology of Scripture}, stating that the Fathers were unable to lay down clear and systematic principles for their judgements concerning the Scriptures. Origen’s denial of the

\textsuperscript{280} Martin Luther, \textit{Lectures on Genesis. Luther’s Works}, vol. 5, trans. George V. Schick & Paul D. Pahl, WA 43, 574–582.


\textsuperscript{283} Henri de Lubac, \textit{Medieval Exegesis}, vol. 2, 11.

historicity of some details of the Bible was for Fairbairn a result of a “vicious system of interpretation which prevailed in his age”. He stated that Origen was possessed by “allegorical fury”, but admitted that Origen does not seem to have generally discredited the facts of sacred history. Fairbairn’s brief chapter with contrasting statements shows the lack of interest of the era into providing a more elaborated study on the exegesis of the Fathers.

In the end of 19th century, Edwin Hatch saw the Antiochene school of exegesis as an antagonising force against the prevailing allegorical exegesis of the Alexandrian school. He saw Alexandrian philosophy as an idealistic fusion of Platonism, Stoicism and Pythagoreanism, “a philosophy of dreams and mystery”, whereas the thought of the Antiochene school presented a more realistic Aristotelian approach, a philosophy of “logic and system”.

The exaggerating and simplifying division presented by Hatch and others was criticised by Henri de Lubac, who argued that it would be incorrect to describe the controversy between Antiochene and Alexandrian schools of exegesis as a controversy between science and spirit. In the first half of the 20th century, Antiochene exegesis has often been seen as a precursor to modern historical critical method, which doesn’t really do justice to the Alexandrians. Alexandrian exegesis, indeed, puts more emphasis on the spiritual sense while Antiochene exegesis emphasises on the plain literal sense. But the Antiochenes did not omit the spiritual sense completely, as the Alexandrians did not omit the plain literal sense. De Lubac gave answers to the criticism against Origen’s allegorical exegesis as a way of interpretation that distorts the history of the Bible. According to de Lubac, allegory does not destroy the history of the Bible, but interiorises it; in this kind of treatment, the details of a Biblical narrative become spiritual landmarks or stages on an inner journey of a believer.

De Lubac’s treatment of the exegesis of the Fathers caught the attention of G. W. H. Lampe, K. J. Woollcombe and R. P. C. Hanson. Woollcombe acknowledged the merit of de Lubac’s work, but made the claim that de Lubac had failed in showing the apparent contrast between Antiochene typology and Alexandrian allegory. Lampe sees Gregory of Nyssa as an Origenist (basing his

286 Edwin Hatch, _The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages_, 81.
287 Henri de Lubac, _History and Spirit. The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen_. San Francisco 1950, 15–17, 22, 27.
289 More on interiorizing Scripture in chapter 3.1.
argument on the view of von Harnack) and an antagonist to the literal Antiochene exegesis of Diodore and Chrysostom. For Lampe, Gregory’s allegories are often artificial type, which dangerously ignores history. Hanson saw most of de Lubac’s arguments in defense of allegory unconvincing. The spiritualizing type of allegory practiced by Philo, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa “has no legitimate ground in historical reality” but it must be considered as “theological fantasy”. This criticism is based on the notion that the Antiochenes were the legitimate followers of Paul’s typological interpretation, while Origen and Gregory followed Philo’s hellenising allegorical interpretation.

The thesis of Hanson, Lampe, and Woollcombe is based on an earlier work by Leonhardt Goppelt. Goppelt argued that allegorical method of the Alexandrians represents the Old Testament “as a book of metaphors hiding a deeper meaning”, whereas the typology of the writers of the New Testament represent the Old Testament as “an account of historical events and teachings from which the meaning of the text arises.” The typological interpretation of the writers of the New Testament was further adopted by Irenaeus and the Antiochene exegetes, who rejected the Alexandrian allegorical method as a legitimate way of interpretation. This sharp distinction between Alexandrian allegory and Antiochene typology was adopted by several scholars, including Daniélon, and was criticised already in 1947 by de Lubac. Mark Sheridan has noted that this sharp distinction has not anymore been accepted by most modern scholars.

3. Gregory of Nyssa’s Topographical Imagery
In this chapter I am going to present a deeper analysis of the details of Gregory’s theoria in the second part of The Life of Moses. My main focus is the origins and functions of Gregory’s topographical details in his symbolic pattern. Firstly, I will concentrate on the Egyptian lowlands: the river, the sea and the desert

291 R. C. P. Hanson, Allegory and Event, 256–257, 281.
Secondly, I will focus on Gregory’s mountain experience (subchapters 3.8–3.11.).

Albert C. Geljon’s *Philonic Exegesis* is the most elaborate study on the origins of Gregory’s exegesis, containing analysis of most symbols presented in *The Life of Moses*. The method of allegorical reading of geographical symbols is not a new and original invention of Gregory, but is rooted in the tradition of Origen and Philo. Some scholars emphasise Philo’s influence, while others emphasise Origen’s importance. According to Belden C. Lane, Gregory’s apophatic mysticism, based on the desert and mountain experience of Moses and the Israelites, derives from Philo, Clement of Alexandria and Origen.\(^{295}\) Albert C. Geljon, on the other hand, defines Gregory’s symbolical exegesis as *Philonic*; he argues that Gregory used Philo as a direct source in several occasions for his symbols. I agree with Geljon that several details of Gregory’s exegesis have indeed a Philonic background; however many of them have been altered by Gregory for another kind of purpose.

Werner Jaeger, on the other hand, argues that Gregory based his theology on Origen’s scattered verses in his voluminous allegorical commentaries and integrated them in a more compact form.\(^{296}\) I agree with Jaeger that some symbolic details of Gregory are certainly indebted to Origen. However, perhaps the most important aspect in Gregory’s work is the attempt to establish a coherent pattern of allegorical details is more indebted to Origen than Philo. Philo presents his allegorical interpretation as single independent units, whereas Origen is more willing to create patterns based on his allegorical details. Gregory relies on the earlier works of Philo, Origen, and others, but the outcome in *The Life of Moses* turns out to be quite different from his predecessors. As we shall see, Gregory’s symbolic pattern is contrasting in comparison with Origen’s, as it has earlier been noted by Andrew Louth.\(^{297}\)

Gregory’s tendency to turn details of a Biblical narrative into the inner journey of a soul pursuing virtue is a method already present in Alexandrian exegesis. In this kind of allegorical interpretation, various events of a Biblical narrative are “spiritualized into processes within the soul”, as Rudolf Bultmann

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\(^{295}\) Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 3, 12.
describes it.\textsuperscript{298} As noted earlier, de Lubac has described the same phenomenon as \textit{interiorizing} the history of the Scriptures.\textsuperscript{299} Interiorizing history in relation with \textit{The Life of Moses} is a problematic matter, since, first of all, the scholars have not found any solid ground for the historicity of the narratives of the Pentateuch. Secondly, as John J. O’Keefe has noted, the aim of Gregory’s \textit{historia} is not to question or reconstruct an account of “the historical Moses”, in other words, what really happened to Moses and the Israelites on their journey. His aim is rather to compile a summary of the narratives of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy in order to produce a narrative of Moses’s life as a whole, which makes the narrative more accessible to the reader. For O’Keefe, Gregory’s \textit{theoria} is “a web of scriptural associations”, which suits well as a description for the phenomenon.\textsuperscript{300}

Belden C. Lane describes the experience of threatening wilderness as an invitation ”to the unexplored landscapes of an \textit{inner geography}”. According to Lane, Gregory of Nyssa guides the soul to the world of the invisible by using the sense phenomena of desert and mountain experience.\textsuperscript{301} I would add to Lane’s description that, in addition desert and mountain imagery, Gregory’s exegesis in \textit{The Life of Moses} includes interpretations based on the images of the city, the ocean, and the river. I would define Gregory’s method as spiritualizing or interiorizing events that are connected to the topographical locations of the Exodus narrative.

Herbert Musurillo has categorised the symbols used in Gregory’s \textit{Life of Moses} as \textit{event-symbols}, symbols that are connected with an actual event in the original narrative, but are given a deeper symbolical meaning. Musurillo writes: “Now it is characteristic of this treatment that the primary interest is not in the historical details of the life of Moses (such as would appeal, perhaps, to a modern historian or student of Scripture), but rather in Moses' life as an \textit{historia}, that is, as a text by which the meaning of the life of the Christian could be taught and illustrated.”\textsuperscript{302} According to Nonna Verna Harrison, Gregory’s treatise is an attempt to build bridges between the Biblical narrative and the community of readers of his own time.\textsuperscript{303} As Musurillo and Harrison have noted, Gregory’s task

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\textsuperscript{299} Henri de Lubac, \textit{History and Spirit}, 22.
\textsuperscript{301} Belden C. Lane, \textit{The Solace of Fierce Landscapes}, 101.
\textsuperscript{302} Herbert Musurillo, ‘History and Symbol’, 359, 371.
\end{flushleft}
was to make the Exodus narrative relevant to the reader; not only as a historical narrative written long ago, but to adapt what was said to the necessities of the listener, to draw doctrinal elements from it, and most importantly, to encourage momentum of the reader towards God. Thus *The Life of Moses* is Gregory’s answer to the question of how to use narratives of the Hebrews in Christian education. The aim of Gregory’s teaching is not only to teach the actual events of Biblical narratives but also give meaning to them from a moral, pedagogical, metaphysical, interpretational, and spiritual points of view.

### 3.1. Categorising the Topographical Symbols

My study in the analysis of Gregory’s topographical imagery relies on Albert C. Geljon’s earlier work, *Philonic Exegesis in Gregory of Nyssa’s De Vita Moysis*. Geljon’s study covers various types of symbols presented in *The Life of Moses*, whereas my purpose is to concentrate mainly on the topographical symbols of the Exodus narrative.

In this study I divide Gregory’s symbols into three categories:

1. **The general topographical symbols:** the river, the stream, the sea, the desert, the campsites, and the mountain.
2. **The symbols of a certain geographical location mentioned in the biblical narrative:** Egypt, the Red Sea, Mount Sinai, the Spring of Marah, and the Land of Israel.
3. **There are also symbols mentioned on this study,** which are not directly geographical or topographical, but are related to an event that occurred in a certain geographical location. Such symbols are the cloud, the cloudy pillar, the Pharaoh, and the rock. This category also includes the symbolism of light and darkness.

Gregory mainly refers to topography in a general level (category 1), and refers rarely to the exact locations of the Exodus narrative (category 2). The Nile (1.17), Mount Sinai (1.42), the Red Sea (1.31) and the spring of Marah (2.153) are all mentioned only once in *The Life of Moses*, while the Land of Israel is mentioned on three occasions (1.29, 1.75, 2.134). Gregory also refers to Israel as the Promised Land (1.65, 1.75, 2.313), or the land of milk and honey (2.265). Gregory rather refers to Israelites as a nation rather that Israel as a geographical

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location. Jerusalem is mentioned only when Gregory is referring to the heavenly Jerusalem (2.247). Gregory’s exegesis differs in this respect from his predecessor Origen, who formed patterns according to etymologies of the original Hebrew place names of the geographical locations presented in the Book of Exodus.

3.2. The River Nile – The Stream of Life

The starting point of Gregory’s journey of inner geography is the Nile River of Egypt. The narrative of the birth of Moses symbolizes the beginning of a virtuous life. According to Gregory, this kind of birth is different from the birth of a body, which occurs by chance.

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, whether male or female, moulding ourselves to the teaching of virtue or vice.

According to Gregory’s interpretation, the birth of Moses, the starting point of Gregory’s pattern, is a symbol that marks a moment in one’s life when the soul chooses the path of virtue over vice.

The Nile is described in Life of Moses as “the stream of life”. The stream is made turbulent by ”the waves of passions”, into which is plunged the basket, in which the newborn Moses has been placed by his mother. The allegory of life as a threatening stream is already presented in Gregory’s early treatise On Virginity, in which Gregory compares human life with a “tossing and tumultuous stream”.

Geljon suggests that the allegory of the stream of life is rooted in the tradition that has its beginning in Heraclitus’s concept known as the flux, which is presented in Eusebius of Cesarea’s Preparation of the Gospel (Fragment 12). Heraclitus compared perpetual process of intelligent souls to the stream of a river. This allegory is repeated by Plato in Cratylus and by Plutarch in On the

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305 Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Moses, 1.17, 1.29, 1.31, 1.42, 1.75, 2.153, 2.247, 2.265, 2.313.
306 Origen, Homilies on Numbers, Homily 27.
308 Ex. 1:5–6; Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Moses, 1.16–17, 2.3, 2.5.
311 Albert C. Geljon, Philonic Exegesis, 84–85.
312 “For wishing to make it clear that there is a perpetual production of intelligent souls by exhalation, he compared them to rivers, speaking as follows: Though men step into the same rivers, the waters that from time to time flow over them are different” Eusebius of Caesarea, Praeaparatio Evangelica, trans. E. H. Gifford, 1903, book 15, chapter 20.
It really seems that Heraclitus would have been one of the first to use the river as an allegory of the soul’s progress; there is even a hint in it that the process is perpetual, as is Gregory’s concept of *epektasis*. Gregory sees a threatening and unpredictable connotation in the *flux*, which heaves and tosses the soul, and even may sink it altogether. Heraclitus doesn’t seem to add any threatening connotations to his concept of *flux* as Gregory does.

Geljon has noted that the phrase ‘stream of life’ is a typical phrase that Philo uses several times in his treatises. In *On Dreams* 2.109, Philo writes about the torrents that the Egyptian river of passions sends forth, that threaten to harm or drown the blossoming of a soul. Moreover, in *Allegorical Interpretation* 3.18, Philo compares the river that Jacob crosses with objects affecting the outward senses, which threaten to drown the soul by the flood of passions. Here Philo attests that the ever-changing continuous motion of the *flux* draws the attention of the soul towards the outward senses only, and makes the soul prone to the passions. Philo uses the traditional metaphysical allegory of Heraclitus and shifts its emphasis to moral allegory. This makes Gregory dependent on Philonic narrative rather than Heraclitus’s. For Gregory, the heaving and restless motion of the river easily submerges the soul into deceitful affairs, and makes the soul’s virtue fruitless. Gregory does not point here to the outward senses as Philo does, but nevertheless uses similar connotations.

The basket where newborn Moses is placed, symbolises rational education which keeps the soul outside the “turmoil of life” – a phrase already presented in his early treatise *On Virginity*, and again repeated in *The Life of Moses*. Gregory emphasizes here the importance of education in the early stages of life to keep the soul on the right path. However, Gregory stresses that profane education

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314 “Heracleitus says, you know, that all things move and nothing remains still, and he likens the universe to the current of a river, saying that you cannot step twice into the same stream.” Plato, *Cratylus. Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 9, trans. H. N. Fowler, 402A.
315 “‘It is impossible to step twice in the same river (*potamo*)’ are the words of Heracleitus…” Plutarch, *The E at Delphi. Moralia*, trans. F. C. Babbitt, section 18.
318 The phrase “turmoil of life” appears in the writings of Augustine, who was Gregory’s younger contemporary, and of Gregory the Great. Bernard McGinn, ‘Ocean and Desert as Symbols of Mystical Absorption in the Christian Tradition’, *Journal of Religion*, 74 no 2, april 1994, 158.
319 “Just so, only the man who lives in the *turmoil of life* has to feel its force; only he has to receive those sufferings which nature’s stream, descending in a flood of troubles, must, to be true to its kind, bring to those who journey on its banks. But if a man leaves this torrent, and these “proud waters,” he will escape from being “a prey to the teeth” of this life”. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, trans. W. Moore & H. A. Wilson, 4.6.
is something that is always in labour and never gives birth. Therefore the soul should not be separated from the nourishment of Church’s milk. With this allegory, Gregory seems to imply that the soul cannot advance on the path of virtue unless the soul is subjected to the teachings of the Fathers of the Church preferably already in the early stages of life.\footnote{ibid. 2.8, 2.11.}

3.3. Egypt – The Maze of This World

Egypt seems to be an important symbol for Gregory in his inner geography, since it has been mentioned several times in The Life of Moses throughout the work. He connects Egypt with several connotations, most of them exceedingly negative. This doesn’t mean that Gregory would have something against Egypt as a nation. Egypt serves in Gregory’s model as a common symbol of city life and the problems connected with it, such as material life inclined to the pleasures and passions, idolatry, poor leadership and persecutions of tyrants.

Gregory presents an interpretation of Egypt already in his early work On Virginity: “We cannot be rid of the Egyptian bondage, unless we leave Egypt, that is, this life that lies under water”.\footnote{Gregory of Nyssa, On Virginity, trans. W. Moore & H. A. Wilson, 4.6.} Here Gregory connects Egypt with the waters that threaten to sink the soul in a similar manner as in his interpretation of the Nile in The Life of Moses.

For Gregory, Egypt symbolises this life, “the maze of this world”, life of delusion that has to be left behind.\footnote{ibid.} Gregory’s interpretation of Egypt is connected with its leader, the Pharaoh, whom he defines as a tyrant and a demon, who has enslaved the Israelites and forced them into hard labour for making bricks from clay. Gregory sees the Pharaoh as a \textit{typos} of an irrational leader, who considers valuable only “the material and fleshly things”.\footnote{Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Moses, trans. A. J Malherbe & E. Ferguson, 1.23, 1.35, 2.59.} Gregory’s interpretation of the Pharaoh is somewhat different from his brother Basil’s interpretation,\footnote{“Had not Israel passed the sea, he would not have escaped Pharaoh; and if thou pass not through the water, thou wilt not be delivered from the sad tyranny of the devil.” St. Basil the Great, Exhortation to Baptism, in Francis Patrick Kenrick (trans), A Treatise on Baptism, Philadelphia 1843, 228–229.} who sees the Pharaoh as a \textit{typos} of the devil, which is originally Origen’s interpretation.\footnote{Origen interprets Paul by stating that the sea signifies baptism with water, and the cloud baptism with the Holy Spirit and defines the Pharaoh of Egypt as “the prince of this world”. Origen, Homilies on Exodus, trans. R. E. Heine, 2.1, 5.1.}

\footnote{320 ibid. 2.8, 2.11.}
\footnote{321 Gregory of Nyssa, On Virginity, trans. W. Moore & H. A. Wilson, 4.6.}
\footnote{322 ibid.}
\footnote{323 Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Moses, trans. A. J Malherbe & E. Ferguson, 1.23, 1.35, 2.59.}
\footnote{324 “Had not Israel passed the sea, he would not have escaped Pharaoh; and if thou pass not through the water, thou wilt not be delivered from the sad tyranny of the devil.” St. Basil the Great, Exhortation to Baptism, in Francis Patrick Kenrick (trans), A Treatise on Baptism, Philadelphia 1843, 228–229.}
\footnote{325 Origen interprets Paul by stating that the sea signifies baptism with water, and the cloud baptism with the Holy Spirit and defines the Pharaoh of Egypt as “the prince of this world”. Origen, Homilies on Exodus, trans. R. E. Heine, 2.1, 5.1.}
According to Gregory, those who want to be free from passions must stay away from “the turmoil of the marketplace”. Gregory points here to the aspects of city life, which predispose the soul to temptations, such as gluttony and materialism. The Israelites’s labour of brick making symbolises repetitious yearning of pleasures and material things. At this stage the soul is bound by addictions and temptations, always desiring more, while never becoming content. Gregory connects life inclined to the bodily passions with the appetitive part of the soul, which must be controlled by moderation (sophrosyne). The question is whether Gregory thinks that one must physically withdraw from city life completely, or, if he treats it solely as a metaphor, that moderation can also be implemented in the city. The solitary life of the monks in the Egyptian desert clearly represent for Gregory the ideal of apatheia, complete freedom of the passions. However, Gregory doesn’t make any statement that control by moderation could not be practiced in the city as well.

Gregory’s exegesis is rooted in Origen’s interpretation of Egypt. Egypt for Origen symbolises wordly life, life of daily activities full of confusion, disturbances, noisy people, temptations and ignorance, focusing only on fleshy things, pleasures and luxury. Origen’s interpretation of Egypt is inclined to moral allegory, emphasizing withdrawal from society and a modest way of life in silence.

Gregory holds also positive connotations for Egypt, which, for him represents pagan learning: moral and natural philosophy, geometry, astronomy, dialectics and all kinds of useful things can be “borrowed” for the use of the Church. However, Gregory connects philosophical doctrines with Egypt that are according to him “fleshy and uncircumcised”, such as metempsychosis, which he connects with Plato’s Phaedrus 248C, the Platonic doctrine of the eternity of matter, and the Stoic conception of God as a material object.

According to Geljon, Gregory follows Philo’s line of interpretation in his exegesis of Egypt, with the exception that, for Gregory, Egypt symbolises the

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327 Origen of Alexandria, Homilies on Exodus, trans, R. E. Heine, 2.1, 3.3.
328 ibid. 2.115.
bodily passions and not the body itself. Gregory departs from Philo, who seems to be a supporter of the doctrine of metempsychosis, which Gregory saw as a doctrine not acceptable for Christians.

3.4. The Sea of Life – The Deep Water of Evil

In this subchapter we are going to have a look at how the sea has been used as a symbol of this life and its trials in Gregory of Nyssa’s exegesis. There are surprisingly many examples of this kind of symbolism in Gregory’s writings, as well as in the works of his predecessors.

In The Life of Moses, Gregory gives the sea negative connotations, describing it as “the deep water of evil” that threatens the soul with “billows of passion”. According to Gregory, drifting in the sea of life “with a pilotless mind” functions as a symbol of “those who wander outside virtue”. The sign of a beacon or a mountain top coming into view takes the soul back onto the right course towards the “harbour of virtue” or “the harbour of the divine will”.

Gregory’s interpretation of the Red Sea is already presented in his early work On Virginity:

We cannot be rid of the Egyptian bondage, unless we leave Egypt, that is, this life that lies under water, and pass, not that Red Sea, but this black and gloomy Sea of life.

Here again the element of water gets a negative interpretation in a similar manner as the Nile River. Gregory’s teaching here is in line with with Origen: one must leave Egypt and pass the Red Sea, but in a figurative fashion, not in space. Water symbolises here again something threatening for the soul. The soul is free from total bondage and ignorance, but is still in danger of being threatened by the passions and brought back to Egypt.

There is a parallel to this allegory in Funeral Oration on Meletius, which Gregory held in the memory of Meletius, the bishop of Antioch. Gregory writes:

He (Meletius) has left Egypt behind, this material life. He has crossed, not this Red Sea of ours, but the black gloomy sea of life. He has entered upon the land of promise, and holds high converse with God upon the mount.

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330 For Philo, “Pharaoh is a leader of passions, lover of matter, pleasure, and the body, while Egypt represents the body and passions.” Albert C. Geljon, Philonic Exegesis, 101–102.
332 Albert C. Geljon, Philonic Exegesis, 79–80, 84–85.
This is a very important passage, since it tells us what happens to the soul in the end of the pattern of Gregory’s inner geography. After death, the virtuous soul has left Egypt and the Sea of life behind for good, and reaches the goal by entering the Promised Land and ascending the divine mountain of heavenly Jerusalem where God dwells. For Gregory, the Promised Land is a symbol of the afterlife. The soul is restored and returns to its Source and Creator (*apokatastasis*). *The Funeral Oration on Meletius* gives a hint as to why the sea of life was seen by Gregory as gloomy and full of turmoil:

> Oh! Miserable shipwreck! How, even with the harbour around us, have we gone to pieces with our hopes! How has the vessel, fraught with a thousand bales of goods, sunk with all its cargo, and left us destitute who were once so rich! Where is that bright sail which was ever filled by the Holy Ghost? Where is that safe helm of our souls which steered us while we sailed unhurt over the swelling waves of heresy? Where that immovable anchor of intelligence which held us in absolute security and repose after our toils? Where that excellent pilot (Meletius) who steered our bark to its heavenly goal?336

Here Gregory reveals that it was “the swelling waves of heresy” that threaten the soul on its journey at sea. Gregory and Meletius had been involved in the battle against several religious groups, such as Neo-Arians and Apollinarians, both of which even had to go into exile because of the Arian controversy. Meletius, the president of the Second Council of Constantinople, died in 381 during the first weeks of the Council.337 Gregory described the loss of Meletius in this crucial moment dramatically as a shipwreck for the Church.

Geljon suggests that Gregory’s allegory of drifting at sea has its origin in Plato.338 In *The Republic*, Plato presents his allegory of the shipmaster, who represents a ruler of a republic. The shipmaster surpasses in height and strength all others on the ship, but is slightly deaf and has bad vision. All the other sailors try to get in control of the ship by immoral means, while binding and stupefying the most worthy shipmaster.339 Also Xenophon340 and Dio Chrysostom341 present a rather similar moral allegory related to steering a ship. Although Gregory of Nyssa’s allegories of the sea belong to the same category of moral allegory and

336 ibid.
339 Plato, *Republic*, 488A–489B.
341 Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses*, vol. 3, 34.16.
contain some similarities with Plato’s and Xenophon’s allegories, there are differences in the details between the allegories of the three authors. Gregory used the allegory of a shipmaster as a symbol of church leadership, not as the symbol of state leadership as Plato did.

Geljon suggests that while the allegory has its origin in Plato, Philo is the main author that Gregory’s allegories are based on, given that the idea of the harbour as a destination of virtuous life also appears in Philo’s allegory in *The Sacrifices of Abel and Cain.*342 Also the image of threatening waves is present in Philo’s allegories. In *Allegorican Interpretation,* Philo states that the mind is the pilot of the soul, which holds the vessel in the right course, but the vessel is upset when it is threatened by billows.343 Philo uses the same term (*naukleros,* shipmaster) as his predecessors Plato and Xenophon, which implies that Plato’s allegory of the shipmaster is most probably Philo’s source.

The image of the threatening sea of life and the mind as a pilot of a ship aiming for the heavenly harbour occurs also in Clement of Alexandria’s works.344 It seems that Clement has transformed the Platonic and Philonic images into Christian use. Even though there are slight similarities between Gregory’s and Clement’s allegories, Gregory seems to be more dependent of Plato’s and Philo’s interpretations and doesn’t seem to use Clement here as a source. Nevertheless, Clement’s passages indicate that the symbol of the sea of life was used by Christians already before Gregory.

3.5. The Red Sea – The Symbol of Baptism
In Gregory’s exegesis, the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites symbolises baptism.345 This very common interpretation among the Fathers is based on Paul’s allegory on 1. Cor 10:1–2.346 In *The Life of Moses,* Gregory presents a detailed interpretation of the Crossing of the Red Sea. The Egyptian army, sent by the

342 “…not in order that being tossed about hither and thither in the surf and tempest and heavy waves, you may be deprived of all rest of stability, but having escaped from such agitation you may enjoy fine weather and a calm, and reaching virtue as a place of refuge, or port, or harbour of safety for ships, may lie in safety and steadiness.” Philo of Alexandria, *The Sacrifices of Abel and Cain,* trans. C. D. Yonge, 27 (90).
346 “…our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea.” NRSV 1989.
Pharaoh to hunt the Israelites, represent the passions that enslave the soul and pursue it to return to Egypt. Returning to Egypt here symbolises defeat in the battle against the passions, abandonment of the virtuous way of life and turning back to life enslaved by passions and pleasures. Gregory presents a detailed list of passions that the soul must put to death in the process of purification: covetousness, unbridled desire, rapacious thinking, the passion of conceit and arrogance, wild impulse, wrath, anger, malice, and envy.\textsuperscript{347} Crossing the Red Sea signifies a radical change of life: the passions must be put to death in baptism. Gregorystresses that "no remnant of evil should mix with the subsequent life".\textsuperscript{348} This has led to interpretations that the soul basically should not sin at all after baptism. This radical interpretation of the Fathers led to the tradition that many ancient Christians postponed baptism until old age, or even until their deathbed.\textsuperscript{349}

Gregory’s interpretation of the Red Sea seems to be rooted in the Jewish tradition of proselyte baptism. Oskar Skarsaune has seen parallels between allegorical exegesis in relation to the tradition of Jewish proselyte baptism and the early Christian baptism. Proselytes were people of non-Jewish origin who wanted to become Jewish believers through conversion. The process of conversion of a proselyte was compared to the Exodus narrative. The same thing that happened to the Israelites when they were saved from Egypt and entered the covenant at Sinai happens to the proselyte in the process of conversion. Skarsaune states:

The Israelites were cleansed from their Egyptian defilement by going through the waters (cf. Paul in 1 Cor 10:1-2); or they took a bath when they were asked to make themselves clean before entering the covenant at Sinai. In this way the description of what happens to the proselyte at his or her conversion is the same as the description of what happened to the Israelites in the exodus and at Sinai: it is a transition from death to life, from darkness to light, from bondage to freedom.\textsuperscript{350}

Skarsaune shows here that there was a tradition already in Judaism in which the process of conversion was seen in relation to the paradigm of the Exodus narrative. I see a parallel here with Gregory, who says that in the process of \textit{aphairesis}, all foreign defilement of Egyptian learning should be put behind, and

all various kinds of passions (the Egyptian army), should be put to death in baptism.\textsuperscript{351}

Gregory’s allegory of the Egyptian army seems to have a Philonic background, which is already attested by Geljon.\textsuperscript{352} In \textit{Allegorical Interpretation} and \textit{On Drunkenness}, the Pharaoh’s horse riders that are thrown into the sea represent freedom of the passions.\textsuperscript{353} In the treatises \textit{On Husbandry}, Philo states that the Egyptians hate virtue and love the passions and vices. Philo provides here a list of passions: pleasures, appetites, injustice, wickedness, rapine and covetousness. There are also differences: the Pharaoh is described as impious and arrogant man, and not the devil. There is no reference to baptism, and the evil spirits are also absent from Philo’s interpretation.\textsuperscript{354}

\textbf{3.6. The Desert – The Symbol of Purification}

Connecting divinity with the desert is a very common image within the Judeo-Christian tradition. The patriarchs Abraham and Moses were desert wanderers. In the New Testament, John the Baptist was defined as “the voice of one shouting in the desert”,\textsuperscript{355} calling people for repentance. Jesus, on the other hand, withdrew to the desert to pray (Luke 5:16), or was driven there by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 4:1). In the period of classical antiquity, however, deities were connected rather with fertile and idyllic landscapes in the countryside, and not with the rugged, dry and empty desert landscape. Therefore, it is not fruitful to seek the origins of desert symbolism in connection with divinity from the Greek \textit{paideia}. For the Jews and Christians, the desert has been a common terrain for divine encounter as well as confronting the devil and the demons. The Desert Fathers, being inspired by the narratives of the patriarchs as well as following the example of Jesus, withdrew into the Egyptian desert to take distance from the city and live solitary lives as hermits, battling against the temptations caused by the demons.\textsuperscript{356}

Gregory of Nyssa’s brother Basil travelled all around Egypt as well, learning about the ways of the solitary ascetical life of the hermits, and used what he had learned about desert asceticism as a model for his own ascetical movement. Egypt was not a region to be avoided for the Cappadocians; on the

\textsuperscript{351} Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{The Life of Moses}, 2.37–38, 2.122, 2.125.
\textsuperscript{352} Albert C. Geljon, \textit{Philonic Exegesis}, 115.
\textsuperscript{353} Philo of Alexandria, \textit{Allegorical interpretation}, II, 25 (102); Philo of Alexandria, \textit{On Drunkenness}, 29 (111–112).
\textsuperscript{354} Philo of Alexandria, \textit{On Husbandry}, 18 (83–84).
\textsuperscript{355} Mark 1:3, Amplified Bible 1987.
contrary, the Egyptian hermits served as models of praxis for ascetical and philosophical life. Biblical desert imagery, as well as the desert experience of the Fathers, have served as a model for the development of the ascetical traditions of the Christian monastic movement.  

One of the most influential interpreter of desert images was undoubtedly Origen, whose exegesis influenced Gregory’s imagery of the desert. According to Anders Jacobsen, the desert represented for Origen trials and temptations on a spiritual path. The desert is a dangerous terrain where one must be careful not to be harmed by snakes, which for Origen represent demons and their evil suggestions. For Gregory of Nyssa, the snakes on the desert represent pleasures, evil desires and sin, but not demons. Both Origen and Gregory seem to be indebted to Philo’s interpretation in Allegorical Interpretation 2.76–81. In Philo’s allegory the snakes represent pleasures of the belly, which is repeated by Gregory, who also mentions the pleasures of the stomach in connection with the snakes. 

On the other hand, Origen sees the desert as an intermediate phase also in terms of interpretation of the law; it resides between the lowly understanding of the letter (literal sense), connected with Egypt, and the lofty understanding (spiritual sense), which is connected with Mount Sinai. The desert represents for Origen the current phase that the Church has entered, which is an intermediate phase between baptism and the spiritual ascent. The desert represents a stage which involves battles against “the evils of their former lives in ‘this world’” and purifying ones words, thoughts and deeds, so that one could “see God”. The soul has at this stage left behind the life completely inclined to the passions, and goes through a preparatory process of purification in order to be prepared for a true Divine encounter.

For Gregory of Nyssa, the desert symbolises the stage of purification of the body, “the separation and liberation of the soul from all material bondage”, as Werner Jaeger describes it. In Gregory’s map of inner geography, the desert represents purification of Egypt and its pleasures, the withdrawal from the foreign way of life bound to matter. The interpretation here is rooted in Origen’s interpretation of the Platonic practice of moral purification, in which the soul
detaches itself from the bodily senses, which distract the soul of practicing virtue.\textsuperscript{362}

The process of purification, \textit{apatheia}, has its origin in Stoic philosophy. It designates the ideal state and characteristics of a Stoic sage. \textit{Apatheia} involves purification of the soul from all foreign elements, struggle against the passions and turning away completely from external things. As we can see here, Stoic moral philosophy was appreciated by Christians and the concept of \textit{apatheia} had a significant influence on Christian ethics.\textsuperscript{363}

\textbf{3.7. The Campsites of the Desert}

For Gregory of Nyssa, the campsites of the Israelites in the desert represent divine assistance and hope for better to come on the challenging path of purification. As the \textit{historia} of the Exodus narrative goes, after crossing the Red Sea, the Israelites wandered in the desert for three days, and arrive at the waters of Marah, where the water is undrinkable. Moses then puts his staff in the water, which becomes sweet (Ex. 15:22–25). This stage of the journey represents for Gregory the moment when life without pleasures begin to seem difficult and disagreeable. Gregory connects the wooden staff of Moses with the cross, which recalls the resurrection that brings the soul hope for things to come. The travellers get refreshed at Elim by the twelve springs, which represent the Twelve Apostles, and seventy palm trees, which represent the tradition of the seventy Apostles appointed in addition to the Twelve Disciples. At this stage the soul gets familiar with the teaching of the Gospels.\textsuperscript{364} Origen explains the twelve springs and seventy palm trees in a similar manner, which shows that both Origen and Gregory see an educational element in connection with the desert.\textsuperscript{365} Philo, however, gives a different interpretation by linking the twelve springs to the twelve tribes of Israel, and the seventy palm trees to the seventy elders of nations.\textsuperscript{366}

According to Gregory, the soul empties itself in the desert from the Egyptian nourishment. Gregory refers to the temptation caused by Egyptian fleshpots (Ex. 16:3), which cause the desire for the soul to rebel and return back to Egypt and its pleasures. Those who decide to turn back “to the stomach, to the

\textsuperscript{362} Andrew Louth, \textit{The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition}, 8–9; Plato, \textit{Phaedo}, 66A.


\textsuperscript{364} Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{The Life of Moses}, 2.132–134.

\textsuperscript{365} Origen of Alexandria, \textit{Homily on Exodus}, 7.3.

\textsuperscript{366} Philo, \textit{On The Life of Moses}, 34 (189).
flesh, and to the Egyptian pleasures”, cannot partake in good things ahead, but through repentance, they can get back on the right course.\footnote{Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{The Life of Moses}, trans. A. J. Malherbe & E. Ferguson, 2.138, 2.269–270.}

The idea of the soul returning to Egypt’s pleasures appears also in Philo’s interpretation of the bitterness of Marah:

When he led us forth out of Egypt, that is to say, out of the passions which excite the body, we, travelling in the desert, that is to say, in the path of pleasure, encamped in the place called Marah, a place which had no drinkable water, but where all the water was Bitter. For still the pleasures which are brought into action by means of the eyes, and ears, and belly, and the parts adjacent to the belly, were tempting to us, and charmed us exceedingly, sounding close to us. When, therefore, we desired to be entirely separated from them, they dragged us back, exerting themselves in opposition to us, and entwining themselves round us, and soothing us with all kinds of juggling tricks and assiduous blandishments; so that we, yielding to their unremitting caresses, became alienated from and disinclined to labour, as something very bitter and intolerable, and designed to run back again to Egypt, that is to say, to the condition of an intemperate and lascivious life, if the Saviour had not speedily taken pity on us, and thrown a sweetening branch like a medicine upon our soul, causing it to love labour instead of hating it.\footnote{Philo, \textit{The Sacrifices of Abel and Cain}, trans. C. D. Yonge, 45 (155–156).}

Here Philo defines the journey of the Israelites in the desert as the “path of pleasure”, for, although the soul has escaped Egypt, the soul is still bound to the bodily senses and the Egyptian pleasures that tempt the soul to run back to Egypt. The difference here with Gregory’s exegesis is that Philo associates the life without passions with love of labour, whereas Gregory stresses solitary life away from the center of human affairs:

Moses lived alone in the mountains away from all the turmoil of the marketplace; there in the wilderness he cared for his sheep.\footnote{Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{The Life of Moses}, trans. A. J. Malherbe & E. Ferguson, 1.19.}

Here Gregory makes a distinction between the Egyptian life around the marketplace, being surrounded by temptations, and life in the wilderness, which signifies simple, tranquil and solitary life free from Egyptian pleasures.\footnote{ibid. 2.18–19.} This also correlates with Origen’s ideal, that one must leave Egypt, and not remain “in the gloomy activities of the world” and in the “darkness of daily business”, although Origen’s view is perhaps more drastic compared to Gregory’s.\footnote{Origen of Alexandria, \textit{Homilies on Exodus}, trans. R. E. Heine, 3.3.}

Gregory advises that instead of yearning for the pleasures of past life, the soul should rather nourish itself with manna, which for Gregory represents the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[370] ibid. 2.18–19.
\end{footnotes}
Word (*Logos*), who is Christ. Gregory here points to Paul’s allegorical exegesis on 1. Cor. 10:1–4, and the Bread of Life Discourse (John 6:22–59). The Biblical image is repeated by Origen. As Geljon has noted, several scholars (Daniélou, Malherbe, Ferguson and Runia) connect Philo as well with this interpretation, since he defines the Bread of Heaven as “the continued word (*logos*) of the Lord.” However, Philo naturally doesn’t connect the *logos* with Christ.

According to the Biblical narrative, after receiving nourishment, the Israelites become thirsty in the desert and quarrel against Moses, who consequently hit a rock with his staff and water starts to come out of it (Ex. 17:2–6). Gregory sees that the rock here symbolises Christ, who is at first hard and moistureless for the unbelieving soul to receive, but becomes a spiritual drink to those who are thirsty and employ the staff of faith. Gregory’s interpretation of the rock here is in accord with Paul’s allegory on 1. Cor. 10:4.

### 3.8. The Mountain as a Symbol of Divine Encounter

The mountain is a universally common place of divine encounter in the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as in Greek mythology. In Ancient Canaan, some mountains were considered as places of meetings of the gods. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Mount Zion is assigned as the place of God’s dwelling. In the Ancient Near East, the mountain was seen as a cosmic center for both the natural and the supernatural worlds, where heaven and earth are united. By taking this tradition into account, it is easy to apprehend why Mount Sinai is assigned as a central place of encounter with God in the Book of Exodus.

Also in the classical Greek culture, mountains had a special position as the dwelling place of the gods. Homer portrayed in the 8th book of *Iliad* the assembly of the gods, which was governed by Zeus on Mount Olympus. Aristotle used this myth to explain his philosophical concept of the unmoved mover. Hesiod describes Mount Helicon as the holy dwelling place of the Muses in his *Theogony*. Plato, on the other hand, described the island of Atlantis on his *Critias*, stating that the island, which was Poseidon’s dwelling place, had a

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mountain in its center. Conclusively, the rich mountain imagery of Greek mythology shows that the mountains were central for divine encounter also for the Greeks.

Also worth mentioning is the practice of *oreibasia* (going-on-the-mountain), a Dionysian rite that was performed by a female group called the maenads (i.e. female followers of Dionysios) on the mountainside. According to Algis Uždavinys, the practice of *oreibasia* became a prefiguring image for the Neoplatonice spiritual ascent, *anagoge*. Interestingly, both Neoplatonists and Christians were using the same term *anagoge* in allegorical exegesis for the search of spiritual meaning of a given text.

Philo emphasised the central universal role of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The universal world was for Philo the truest temple of God, and all the aspects and details of the Holy Temple represented the world in a miniature size. In Philo’s symbolic model, the Holy of Holies was equivalent to heaven, the ornaments represented stars, and the priests represented angels. All the other nations were making offerings only on behalf of their own people, but the High Priest on the Temple Mount was making sacrifices on behalf of all nations and the whole universe, which made the mountain the spiritual center of the world.

Certainly one of the most important examples of using mountains as symbols is Apostle Paul’s allegory on Gal. 4:21–31. Here the two mothers, Hagar and Sarah, represent two covenants: Hagar represents the old covenant, established on Mount Sinai, while Sarah represents the new covenant, which is connected by Paul here with Mount Zion in Jerusalem. This passage was very important for Origen as well as Gregory, because they both used it to defend their method of allegorical interpretation against their opponents.

Perhaps one of the most famous and discussed passages of Gregory appears in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. In this treatise Gregory presents his threefold pattern of Moses’s encounters with God, known as ‘light’, ‘cloud’ and ‘darkness’, which all occurred on the mountain. Gregory sets the mountain as a

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379 Plato, *Critias*, 119C.
384 Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 11.322.
central topographical location for Divine encounter as many of his predecessors did, whether they were Greek, Jewish or Christian. There has been a tendency for the scholars to harmonise the pattern of light, cloud and darkness with the three theophanies (theophaneia) presented in The Life of Moses. However, this harmonization is rather problematic, as I am going to show in subchapter 4.6. Therefore I will divide Moses’s mountain experiences into three theophanies instead (discussed in subchapters 3.9, 3.10 and 3.11) and not according to the images of light, cloud and darkness, which better serves the form of my study.

3.9. First Theophany – The Burning Bush
The first theophany is connected with Moses’s first close encounter with God on Mount Horeb, where God appeared to him in the light of the burning bush (Ex. 3). For Gregory, the earthly bush represents God’s incarnation, in other words God becoming visible in the flesh in Jesus Christ. Gregory seems to be the first to connect the theophany with Mary’s virginity: the same way as the bush was not consumed by fire, Mary miraculously did not lose her virginity although she gave birth. The way Gregory connects Mariological and Christological images with the details of the Old Testament narratives may seem peculiar and far-fetched to modern readers. This is, however, a prime example of how Gregory, through his symbols, sees someone imitating Moses whilst also being a follower of Jesus. There is a certain logic in Gregory’s interpretation: the episode of the burning bush signifies for Gregory a theophany of light. The nativity of Christ can be seen as a theophany of light as well, since according to the Gospel of John, Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12). Gregory’s interpretation of burning bush presented as a typos of Virgin Mary has been repeated in the tradition of Orthodox iconography, mainly in the icon of the Mother of God of the Unburned Bush, which is thought to have its origin at the monastery of St. Catherine in the Sinai desert.

The divine light shining from the burning bush is defined by Gregory as illumination (photagogia), a moment in which the the spiritual senses of the soul are awakened, and a manifestation of truth (aletheia), which is God. For Gregory, true knowledge is apprehension of the true essence of the transcendent

385 Gregory’s theology has been defined by Philip Kariatlis as theophanic. Philip Kariatlis, “Dazzling Darkness”: The Mystical or Theophanic Theology of St Gregory of Nyssa”, Phronema, vol. 27(2), 2012.
386 Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Moses, 2.20–21.
387 ibid. 2.19; Patrick F. O’Connell, ‘The Double Journey’, 305.
Being. True knowledge can only be attained by purifying oneself from false opinion (doxa) concerning the essence of Being. Gregory here is referring to the Parmenidean and Platonic concept of aletheia and doxa, applied here to Biblical interpretation. The soul has reached a phase in which the soul must “unlearn its apprehension of false reality”, and advance to the immediate participation with the True Being.\(^{388}\)

Unlearning a false apprehension of reality is part of a process of intellectual purification. Gregory presents here a set of divine attributes: true Being is the transcendent essence, the final cause of the universe, which is immutable to all change. It is neither increasing nor diminishing, in need of nothing, and participated in by all but not lessened by their participation.\(^{389}\) Participation of Being is connected to Gregory’s mystical theology, which is discussed further in relation to Gregory’s 2\(^{nd}\) and 3\(^{rd}\) theophanies in subchapters 3.10, 3.11, 4.4. and 4.6.

Gregory’s sequence is not an individualistic path towards enlightenment; on the mountain, the soul realises that also the others must be guided so that they too attain salvation. At this stage, the soul has reached a stage of maturity, and has now the ability to free himself of the slavery of the passions, save others from bondage, and become a leader of others towards salvation.\(^{390}\)

3.10. Second Theophany – Entering the Cloud
The second phase of Gregory’s sequence of theophanies refers to the cloud that Moses entered on Mount Sinai (Ex. 24:15), which signifies spiritual ascent. The command for the Israelites to wash themselves and their garments (Ex. 19:14) signifies for Gregory purification (katharsis) of the soul and body, which signifies a preparatory process before spiritual ascent.\(^{391}\) In the process of purification, the soul purifies itself from “all sensual and irrational emotion”, which refers to apatheia, a state where the soul is completely free from emotions. This was originally Chrysippus’s concept and it became the common view of the Stoics. Apatheia was the ideal for Gregory’s brother Basil for people who aimed for perfection, but suggested metriopatheia, moderation of emotions and did not call


\(^{390}\) “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 servitude.” Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. A. J. Malherbe & E. Ferguson, 2.26.

\(^{391}\) ibid. 2.153–154.
for complete eradication of feelings from ordinary people. Gregory saw Moses as a man who reached *apatheia*, which should be held as an ideal for those who are engaged in philosophical life. However, in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, there seems to be a plea of *metriopatheia* by Gregory. It appears that Gregory held a similar opinion as his brother, that *apatheia* must be held as an ideal for people aiming for perfection, but *metriopatheia* is followed by ordinary Christians.392

According to Gregory, by following (akolouthia) Moses’s ascent (anabasis) to the mountain, the interpreter is led to the understanding of higher levels of virtue. Ascending the mountain represents ineffable knowledge of God (*Theognosia*). Here again, as in the 1st Theophany, we see the division of knowledge to doxa and aletheia. Those who approach “knowledge of things sublime” must wash away doxa (human opinion) from his understanding. It seems that for Gregory the lowlands represent doxa, and the mountain God’s true knowledge (aletheia393 or *Theognosia*394). According to Gregory, doxa derives from preconception than must be left behind before the ascent.395

Gregory gives his interpretation of the cloud that Moses entered on the mountain (Ex. 19:18) in *Commentary on the Song of Songs*:

> 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 a cloud, which overshadow all appearance, and slowly guides and accustoms the soul to look towards what is hidden.396

Here Gregory’s interpretation is twofold, resembling Plato and Philo. The cloud here symbolises purification from the realm of (1) the corporeal (the sense phenomena and appearance) to the (2) incorporeal (the world of the invisible and hidden things). Gregory’s interpretation is a paradox: Moses is able to see hidden things in the dark cloud (*gnophos*).

In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory sees the second theophany as contradictory in comparison to the first one, since the Divine was seen first as light (*photi*) and now as darkness (*gnopho*). As the soul progresses in virtue, it understands that the divine nature is not perceivable (*atheoretos*). Gregory explains that in order to

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393 Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 2.19, 2.188.
394 ibid. 2.152.
395 ibid. 2.152, 2.157.
396 Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, in Gregory of Nyssa, *From Glory to Glory. Texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s Mystical Writings*. trans. Herbert Musurillo, Crestwood, NY 1979, PG 44.1000C.
penetrate deeper into the darkness, the soul must leave behind every observance of sense perception, as well as what the mind thinks it perceives, and in the darkness the soul understands the invisible (athleteon) and incomprehensible (akatalepton) nature of God. Seeing God in this higher realm of the invisible is paradoxically “not seeing” because of the invisible and incomprehensible nature of Being that transcends all knowledge. Gregory holds John the Evangelist as an example of a man who “penetrated into the luminous darkness (lampro gnopho)” and came to the conclusion that no-one has ever seen God (John 1:18), which means that knowledge of God’s essence is unattainable (anephikton) for all creatures. Gregory attests that God’s essence is beyond all concepts, names and images that attempt to describe divine nature.\(^\text{397}\)

Geljon connects Gregory’s interpretation of the darkness with the line of Philo. For Gregory and Philo, God is incomprehensible (akataleptos) and invisible (aoratos\(^\text{398}\)), and the darkness represents these aspects. The same interpretation appears also in Clement who quotes Philo literally.\(^\text{399}\)

Gregory’s apophatic interpretation of the cloud was an answer to the Neo-Arian monk Eunomius’s claim that the essence of God could be perfectly known.\(^\text{400}\) This positive kataphatic claim of Eunomius was too self-assured for Gregory. He described the mountain of Divine knowledge as steep and difficult to climb; as Gregory says, “the majority of people scarcely reach its base”\(^\text{401}\). Here Gregory’s statement resembles Origen’s view that most Christians reside in the process of purification in the desert, and only a few of them are able to advance on the mountain.

The danger that is connected with the rugged terrain of a mountainous region is for Gregory a suitable image to describe the transcendent nature of the Divine. Gregory’s experience is described in *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*:

Imagine a sheer, steep crag, of reddish appearance below, extending into eternity; on top there is this ridge which looks down over a projecting rim into a bottomless chasm. Now imagine what a person would probably experience if he put his foot on the edge of this ridge which overlooks the chasm and found no solid footing in material things, in its quest for that which has no dimension and which exists for all eternity. For here there is nothing it can hold of, neither place nor time, neither measure nor anything else; it does not allow our minds to approach. And thus the soul, slipping at

\(^{399}\) Albert C. Geljon, *Philonic Exegesis*, 134.
\(^{400}\) Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 64; Albert C. Geljon, *Philonic Exegesis*, 59.
every point from what cannot be grasped, becomes dizzy and perplexed and returns once again to what is connatural to it.\textsuperscript{402}

As we can see here, there is no room for self-assurance in Gregory’s transcendental experience of the Divine presence: there is nothing concrete that the soul can get hold of looking down to that bottomless chasm of God’s eternal, incorporeal, immaterial and immeasurable nature.

\textbf{3.11. Third Theophany – The Cleft of a Rock}

Gregory connects the third theophany with the narrative (Ex. 33:12–23) where Moses asks God to appear to him in his full glory. God replies to Moses: “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” Moses is set standing beside God in a cleft of a rock. God then passes Moses while covering him with his hand, and lets Moses see his back.

Gregory states that one would end up with an absurd conclusion if this passage should be interpreted literally, since God is incorporeal. Therefore, a spiritual sense should be sought after. According to Gregory, the passage describes the spiritual ascent of the soul. The teaching of the passage is that the Divine is boundless and infinite by its nature, and therefore the true vision of God is that the soul will never be satisfied in the desire of seeing God, but is always on the move straining forward. This is defined by Daniélou as the perpetual progress of the soul towards the Good, which Gregory calls \textit{epektasis}, the word which is based on Paul’s passage in Phil. 3:13.\textsuperscript{403} Since God is infinite, the possibilities for the soul to grow are also infinite. \textit{Epektasis} is a progress that lasts a lifetime. Seeing God’s back is an image that shows the position of the soul on the path to virtue: the soul is called to follow God, not face him.\textsuperscript{404} Daniélou considers Gregory’s \textit{epektasis} as a key concept in Gregory’s mystical theology.\textsuperscript{405} Gregory’s concept of \textit{epektasis} will be further discussed on subchapters 4.3 and 4.4.

Jean Reynard discusses Gregory’s view of God’s infinity and its relation with Platios \textit{Parmenides}. In his dialogue, Plato defines the One as \textit{apeiros}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{403} Phil. 3:13 “Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead (\textit{epekteinomenos})” NRSV 1989.
\item \textsuperscript{404} Jean Daniélou, ‘Introduction’, in Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{From Glory to Glory}, 56–58; Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{The Life of Moses}, 2.236, 2.239, 2.242–244, 2.248, 2.251–253.
\item \textsuperscript{405} Albert-Kees Geljon, ‘Divine Infinity in Gregory of Nyssa and Philo of Alexandria’, 162.
\end{itemize}
(boundless, infinite), which inspired Plotinus to define his hypostase of the One as infinite. Reynard comes to the conclusion that Gregory doesn’t refer directly to Plato’s *Parmenides*, but he must have had some other sources to rely on.

Ekkehard Mühlenberg, however, argues that Gregory is the inventor of the concept of divine infinity, since he saw infinity as the essence of God, not only as a limit of human knowledge as Plato did, which makes Gregory’s view on God’s infinity different in comparison with the classical Platonic view. Geljon, however, argues that neither Plato nor Aristotle can be Gregory’s direct sources on divine infinity, since for them infinity is undetermined and imperfect. Origen is referring to this tradition by denying the possibility of divine infinity. Geljon also argues that infinity in Gregory’s theology does not express God’s essence, but it should be seen as part of Gregory’s apophatic theology, the negative way of approaching God. Henri Guyot has attested that it was Philo who first brought forward the notion of divine infinity. This can be criticised, since Philo never actually calls God infinite. Geljon, however, suggests that Philo’s views are a starting point for the development of the concept of divine infinity. The matter, however, is still under dispute among scholars, and requires further investigation.

Gregory’s images of the 3rd theophany form a paradox, which Gregory has noted himself. The soul is straining forward, following God, ascending towards God, and at the same time standing firmly on the rock (a type of Christ or the Good). This is typical for Gregory’s figurative speech; dimensions, corporeality, time, and space are seen in the perspective of the divine. They are symbols that point to the Divine realm, which is non-dimensional, incorporeal, and timeless. Gregory says that the word “place” in Ex. 33:21 does not point to anything quantifiable; by the use of analogy of measured surface, the writer is leading the reader to the unlimited and infinite.

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408 “The LORD said, ‘Look, there is a place near me where you can stand on the rock;’” ISV 2012.

4. The Structure of Gregory of Nyssa’s Topographical Pattern

After processing the symbolic details of Moses’s journey through Biblical topography, the relevant question arises whether Gregory was thinking of each symbolic detail as an independent unit, or whether he had a sequence in mind considering his *theoria*. The exegetes, such as Gregory, who were applying allegorical exegesis, were criticised by their Antiochene opponents of breaking the historical sequence of Scripture with allegorical interpretations that were taken out of context. One of the main arguments of the Antiochene exegetes was that Alexandrian exegesis lacked order and structure and implemented ideas that are alien to the historical sense of Scripture. Diodore of Tarsus, the Antiochene bishop, argued that the *theoria* must arise logically out of the literal sense of a Biblical narrative, and that the allegorists fail in doing that.\(^{410}\)

Perhaps, due to this criticism, Gregory was especially concerned about the overall structure and coherence of his thought. Gregory’s *akolouthia*, the way of following a sequence of thought or a narrative, is a concept, which has its roots in Stoic, Aristotelian, Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy. Gregory used *akolouthia* as a hermeneutical concept throughout all of his works. I see Gregory’s method of exegesis first and foremost as a mimetic method, which aims at the formation of paradigmatic models based on the tradition of Aristotelian logic and artistic *mimesis* (subchapter 4.1.). I will discuss the origins of Gregory’s concept of *akolouthia* in ancient cosmology (subchapter 4.2.), and then see how Gregory applies this concept in *The Life of Moses* as a mimetic method as well as a fundamental concept in the interpretation of Scripture (subchapter 4.3.). Subsequently, I will show how Gregory connects his concept of *akolouthia* with the symbol of a ladder or the steps, which function as structures for Gregory’s spiritual ascent towards immediate nearness to God, as well as a symbol of the journey of a soul towards its final aim, *apokatastasis*, the final return of a soul to its Source and Creator, God (subchapter 4.4.). Finally, I will analyse the structure of Gregory’s topographical pattern as a whole: firstly the lowlands (subchapter 4.5.) and secondly the mountain images (subchapter 4.6.). I will make comparisons of Gregory’s own topographical patterns to the patterns presented by his predecessors and analyse the structures provided by modern scholars. Due to the complexity of these patterns, I have provided a chart which includes the events

of Gregory’s *historia* and its relation to Biblical passages, and Gregory’s sequence of allegorical interpretations of his *theoria* on the final pages (129–134) of my thesis.

**4.1. Mimesis – Imitation in Gregory of Nyssa’s Exegesis**

In this subchapter we are going to have a look at how Gregory applies the concept of *mimesis* (imitation) in his exegesis. We will discuss the Greek origins of *mimesis* in Plato’s and Aristotle’s works, and see how Gregory is developing a bridge between the tradition of Greek and Biblical *mimesis*. Finally, we will discuss how Gregory sees Moses’s life as a mimetic model in *The Life of Moses*. Greek *mimesis* has a widely discussed topic among several scholars.\(^{411}\) The works used in this study that discuss the topic of artistic *mimesis* of Plato and Aristotle are by Matthew Potolsky, Stephen Halliwell and Göran Sörbom.\(^{412}\) Also fruitful for us is David P. Parris’s article, which discusses the relation of Greek *mimesis* and the parables of the New Testament.\(^{413}\) Graham Ward has written an article on the role of *mimesis* in allegorical reading, which has a section that is focused on Gregory of Nyssa’s use of *mimesis* in his exegesis.\(^{414}\) In addition, we will discuss the method of typology and its relation with *mimesis*, presented in G. W. H. Lampe’s and K. J. Woolcombe’s *Essays on Typology* and Charles T. Fritsch’s ‘Biblical Typology’.\(^{415}\)

Parris has summarised that *mimesis* “is the mental ability that allows us to imitate or to represent someone or something in our actions, speech, art or literature.”\(^{416}\) The origin of the meaning of the word *mimesis* lies in mimicry; in the “representation of the looks, actions or utterances of animals or men through speech, song and dancing”. The word *mimesis* derives from the root *mimos* (mime), which is linked with a genre of performance where stereotypical character traits were imitated.\(^{417}\) The concept of mimicry was later transferred to replication of images, such as pictures and statues. In the context of antiquity,

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\(^{416}\) David P. Parris, ‘Imitating the Parables’, 39.

mimesis in representational action, not copying, since “Greeks of the 5th century didn’t have demands for realism required for copying”. Halliwell argues that replicatory fidelity is not required in classical mimesis, basing her argument on Plato’s Cratylus 432A–D; since “if such exactitude were required, its fulfillment would yield a duplicate, not an image at all.” Plato presents his definition of mimesis in Sophist: “When anyone, by employing his own person as his instrument, makes his own figure or voice seem similar to yours, that kind of fantastic art is called mimetic.” Plato did not give high value on artistic mimesis, since the artist is only capable of representing the world of appearances, and not the world of ideas. The result according to Plato therefore is only a vague representation of a representation. He was also concerned about the influence of artistic mimesis, since he felt that the artists were presenting role models in their art that were not suitable for the youth. As I have mentioned earlier, Plato’s criticism was pointed also towards Homeric poetry and its depictions of the gods, which in his opinion were full of immoralities and metaphysical impossibilities. The influence of Platonic criticism can be seen in the exegesis of Philo, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, who all found similar problems in the interpretation of Biblical passages.

Aristotle saw mimesis as imitation or representation, or having something as a model. In comparison with Plato, Aristotle had a more positive view on artistic mimesis. Potolsky states that for Plato, mimesis is a “dangerous and potentially corrupting imitation of reality”, whereas Aristotle saw mimesis as a rational and valid practice, which is “a foundational aspect of human nature”. In Poetics, Aristotle writes about the role of mimesis in traditional Greek tragedy. For Aristotle, tragedy is “a representation (mimesis) of an action that is whole and complete”. The main function of a tragedy is not to teach morals to the viewers but to follow a plot that has a logical form: it has to have a beginning (arkhe), the middle part (meson), and an ending (telos). The different incidents of the plot must not appear randomly, but to form a logical sequence that leads the play in an inevitable manner to and end. This kind of demand of logic and order is a

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418 Göran Sörbom, Mimesis and Art, 18, 26.
419 Stephen Halliwell, Aesthetics of Mimesis, 46.
421 David P. Parris, ‘Imitating the Parables’, 40.
422 Göran Sörbom, Mimesis and Art, 177–178.
423 Matthew Potolsky, Mimesis, 7.
424 Aristotle, Poetics, trans.W. H. Fyfe, 1450B.
feature that is also apparent in Gregory of Nyssa’s view on *mimesis* as well. However, *mimesis* applied by Gregory is also somewhat different, since the ancients believed that the Biblical narratives, such as the Exodus narrative, are true historical narratives, and not imaginative and fictitious creations of poets.

Gregory of Nyssa seems to have been well aware of the tradition of Greek artistic *mimesis*. In *The Life of Moses*, the journey of Moses comes to an end on the highest peak of Mount Nebo. Moses’s ascent on Mount Nebo is compared to a sculptor who makes his finishing touch on his work. In the same way as a work of art, Moses’s virtuous life is perfected on the mountain.⁴²⁵

In his treatise *On Perfection*, Gregory sees the work of a painter as a metaphor of virtuous life:

> If we learn the art of painting, our teacher gives us a certain beautiful form on a tablet: each person's painting must imitate (*mimesasthai*) that form's beauty so that all our tablets might share the model (*hypodeigma*) of beauty set before us. If each picture is one's own life while the choice of this work is the artist's and the colors are virtues (*aretai*) which express the image, there is a danger that the archetypal (*prototypou*) beauty's imitation (*mimesis*) can be remodelled into an ugly, deformed face; instead of the Lord's form we shadow it over with the marks of evil by means of unattractive colors. But it is possible for the virtues' pure colors skillfully combined with each other to imitate beauty that we might be an image of the Image, expressing through our works the prototype's beauty by imitation (*mimesis*), as it were, as Paul has done who had become an imitator (*mimetes*) of Christ by a virtuous life (*areten biou*) (1. Cor 4.16)?⁴²⁶

Gregory seems to have a positive Aristotelian view on artistic *mimesis*, since he is willing to use it as a metaphor for imitating Christ. It is an example of Gregory’s tendency to use some kind of action, this time painting, as a symbol of the process of a soul thriving for virtue. Life is in the beginning like an empty canvas that can be turned into a beautiful creation of art by choosing virtue over vice in each life situation.

Also we must take into account Gregory’s analogy on music and the cosmos in the third chapter of his *Commentary on the Inscriptions of The Psalms*, since music is also another kind of mimetic art. For Gregory, the order (*taxis*) and arrangement (*akolouthia*) of the universe, and the perpetual motion of the planets, can be compared to musical harmony, with its different shapes, colours and

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rhythms. God is the artisan and creator of this well arranged harmony through his Word of wisdom, which doesn’t contain any dissonance. Gregory connects music with the first archetype, God; an artist is someone who is an imitator of him who created the world. 

Even though Gregory is using terminology that relates to Greek artistic mimesis, he clearly states here that his notion of mimesis is based on the Biblical passages of Paul. For Gregory, Paul is the model of virtuous life (arete), the imitator of Christ. The aim of Gregory’s mimesis is arete, virtuous life, in order to attain the likeness and beauty of the perfect archetypal Image, “the Lord’s form”.

In addition to the tradition of artistic mimesis, we must take into account the concept of mimesis in a Biblical context. Apostle Paul exhorts people to become imitators (mimetai) of him (1. Cor. 4:16, 1. Cor. 11:1, Phil. 3:17), of God (Eph. 5:1), “of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (Hebrews 6:12, ESV 2001), and of Christ (1. Thess. 6), so that they may become examples (typoi) for other believers. Patriarchs, prophets, apostles, pious believers, and naturally Christ himself, were seen as types; their lives function as models that are imitated by Christians. In addition to Christ and Paul, Gregory saw Abraham, Moses, David, and even his own brother Basil as examples of virtuous life. In The Life of Moses, Moses was seen as a typos, honourable man who attained perfection, and whose life should be treated as a “pattern of virtue”. Gregory saw Moses as an example of a perfect bishop for Christians. In addition to Moses and Basil, Gregory held Meletius, the bishop of Antioch, as an example of a great leader of the Church. In Gregory’s funeral oration, Meletius is described as an “imitator of Christ”. Gregory states further:

He (Meletius) has left behind him the curtain of the flesh. No longer does he pray to the type or shadow of the things in heaven, but he looks upon the very embodiment of these realities.

The passage here is important since it shows that, according to Gregory, virtuous extraordinary men that had purified themselves in this life and had passed away, were not anymore seeing heavenly things only as a typos or a “shadow”, but they are now contemplating the true nature of the heavenly realities. Gregory holds

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427 Gregory of Nyssa, Commentary on The Inscriptions of the Psalms, trans. C. McCambley, Brookline, Massachusetts 1994, 30–32.
430 Ibid. 454.
Meletius as an example of someone who has reached the telos, the final stage of Gregory’s pattern of virtue, which is apokatastasis, the return of the soul to the immediate nearness of its Creator and Source.

The original meaning of the word typos has a connection with artistic mimesis as well; it is by definition a visual form that is represented by means of crafting, sculpting, modelling or moulding; it can be a model, image, figure, pattern or behavior that is imitated. Apostle Paul uses typos in the meaning of model or pattern.431

Woollcombe has noted that the word typos occurs also in The Old Testament, in Amos 5:26 in the meaning of idols or images of the gods. The word appears also in Ex. 25:40: “And see that you make them (the details of the lampstand) according to the pattern (typon) for them, which is being shown you on the mountain.” Woollcombe suggests that, according to Philo, the archetypos is “the original pattern of the structure conceived by God”, and typos is “an exact copy of the archetype impressed on the mind of Moses”. The mimema is the pattern of the whole structure, and an “exact copy” of the typos. However, as noted earlier, according to the original idea of mimesis, there was no need in the ancient world to make exact copies. The model that Moses received on the mountain was a representation of the ideal, not an exact copy as Woollcombe suggests.432

In The Life of Moses, Gregory presents his interpretation of the tabernacle in Ex. 25:40:

What then is that tabernacle not made with hands which was shown (paradeienymene, represented, exhibited) to Moses on the mountain and to which he was commanded to look as to an archetype (archetypon) so that he might reproduce (deixai; manifest, exhibit, show, portray, represent) in a handmade structure that marvel not made with hands? God says, See that you make them according to the pattern (typon) shown you on the mountain (Ex. 25:40).433

Gregory makes a distinction here between the tabernacle below, “the tabernacle not made with hands”, and the tabernacle above, the heavenly tabernacle.434 In a similar way as Philo, Gregory calls the model that Moses received from God an

432 ibid. 63–64.
434 The expression is based on Heb. 8:2 “a minister in the sanctuary and the true tabernacle, that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up”, as well as Heb. 9:24 “For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy (antitypa, representation, image) of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.” NRSV 1989.
archetype. The earthly tabernacle and its details represent the archetype, the tabernacle above. In Heb. 8:5, the earthly sanctuary is defined as a sketch (hypodeigmati; representation, figure, example to be imitated) and a shadow (skia, an image cast by an object and representing the form of that object), which should be made according to the pattern (typon) that Moses received on the mountain. All three words listed here have a connection with representation and artistic mimesis. Philo defines the earthly tabernacle built by Bezaleel in On Dreams as mimema (something imitated) and skia. The word skia is linked to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. The word skia appears again in Heb. 10:1, which shows that the Laws of the Torah, including the details of the tabernacle, were “shadows (skian) of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities”. The earthly tabernacle was seen by the ancients as a representation and a shadow of the true tabernacle in heaven.

As we have seen in the examples of this subchapter, Gregory’s concept of typos is more versatile in comparison to the Antiochene concept of typos, since it is very open towards the use of Greek paideia and Aristotelian ideas of artistic mimesis in the interpretation of the Bible. Gregory appreciates highly the work of artists, whether he is referring to the work of a painter, a sculptor or a musician. The work of an artist can be compared to the virtuous life of a devout Christian aiming for perfection, and even to the processes of God’s creation.

4.2. Akolouthia – Following a Sequence
Jean Daniélou seems to have been the first who saw the centrality of akolouthia in Gregory’s thought. Akolouthia appears to be a core concept of Gregory’s thought, not merely one of his philosophical methods. It is a concept, which is rooted in Stoic philosophy; its origin can be traced back to Zeno of Citium, the founder of the Stoic school of philosophy. For Zeno, akolouthia is a concept that shows how the things of the past, the present, and the future are knitted together in

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435 Heb. 8:5 ”They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tabernacle, was warned, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.” NRSV 1989.
437 “do you think that these men would have seen anything of themselves or of one another except the shadows (skias) cast from the fire on the wall of the cave that fronted them?” Plato, Republic. Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vols. 5 & 6, trans. Paul Shorey, Cambridge, MA & London 1969, 515A.
439 H.R. Drobner, ´Gregory of Nyssa as Philosopher´, 87; Ari Ojell, One Word, One Body, One Voice, 33n55.
a logical sequence in an inevitable and inescapable manner.\textsuperscript{440} Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl. 200 A.D.) gives a clear explanation of the Stoic akolouthia in his work \textit{On Fate}:

They [the Stoics] say that since the world is a unity which includes all existing things in itself and is governed by a living, rational, intelligent nature, the government of existing things which it possesses is an everlasting one proceeding in a sequence (\textit{eirmon}) and ordering (\textit{taxin}). The things which happen first become causes to those which happen after them…but from everything that happens something else follows (\textit{epakolouthein}), with a necessary (\textit{anagke}) causal dependence on it, and everything that happens has something prior to it with which it causally coheres. For nothing in the world exists or happens causelessly…\textsuperscript{441}

Alexander explains here how the Stoics saw the world as a unity, where all existing things follow a sequence of cause and effect, and each part of the sequence follow the previous one by necessity (\textit{anagke}).

According to Richard A. Norris, the Stoic akolouthia connotes “a series of succession in which the members of the series do not constitute a jumble of items but are closely and intelligibly connected, like the links of a ‘chain’”.\textsuperscript{442} Gregory of Nyssa frequently used the term \textit{eirmos} as a pair with the term akolouthia, meaning ‘sequence’, which in Stoic context is defined as a logical chain of cause and effect (A follows B).\textsuperscript{443} Each detail of the chain (\textit{eirmos}) is connected to the previous one and follows one another in an inevitable manner. Anthony Meredith has noted that in his apology of \textit{Hexaemeron} and \textit{On the Making of Man}, Gregory was searching “for order and connexion (\textit{εἱρμος} and \textit{ἀκολουθία}) in the divine activity.” According to Meredith, Gregory believed that the ultimate aim of an exegete is to be able to follow a sequence of events, which began in the creation of the cosmos, and continues as a progressive development of the universe.\textsuperscript{444} Therefore, Gregory’s method of exegesis does not merely fall into the category of symbolical exegesis. It is important for Gregory that biblical exegesis is based on reason, science and logic.\textsuperscript{445} In Gregory’s cosmology, creation is a fated process, where each stage of the process is a natural inevitable consequence of the previous one. The final aim of Gregory’s sequence of events is \textit{apokatastasis}, another Stoic concept attributed to Gregory and Origen. The concept of \textit{apokatastasis} is based

\textsuperscript{443} See \textit{εἱρμος} in G. W. H. Lampe, \textit{A Patristic Greek Lexicon}.
\textsuperscript{444} Anthony Meredith, \textit{Gregory of Nyssa}, 5–6.
on the notion that all created beings will be restored in their primordial state, as it
was in the beginning, and returned to God, their divine source.\textsuperscript{446} This concept is
well presented in Gregory’s treatise \textit{Concerning Those Who have Died}:

\begin{quote}
…all the stages through which we pass form an integral whole. The final
goal of our journey is restoration (\textit{apokatastasis}) to our original state or
likeness to God.\textsuperscript{447}
\end{quote}

There has been discussion among the scholars whether Gregory knew the
original writings of the Stoics. Paulos Mar Gregorios has suggested that Gregory
might have taken the concept of \textit{akolouthia} from Stoic sources.\textsuperscript{448} H. B. Drobner
argues that Gregory employed Aristotle as a primary source, and the Stoics as
secondary sources. Jean Daniéliou, on the other hand, argued that Gregory was not
familiar with the original Stoic sources, but he actually adopted his cosmological
idea from Philo of Alexandria’s writings, in particular from \textit{On the Creation}:

\begin{quote}
…for if the Creator had made everything at the same moment, still those
things which were created in beauty would no less have had a regular
arrangement (\textit{taxis}), for there is no such thing as beauty in disorder. But
order (\textit{taxis}) is a due consequence (\textit{akolouthia}) and connection (\textit{eirmos})
of things precedent and subsequent, if not in the completion of a work, at
all events in the intention of the maker; for it is owing to order that they
become accurately defined and stationary, and free from confusion.\textsuperscript{449}
\end{quote}

Here Philo explains the logical sequence of the cosmic order by applying the Stoic
concept of \textit{akolouthia} and \textit{eirmos} to describe the connection of things of the past
and on the future. There is another example of Philo’s view in his treatise \textit{Who Is
the Heir of Divine Things}:

\begin{quote}
…Moses represents fate and necessity (\textit{anagken}) as the causes of all things
that exist or take place; but we must not be ignorant that he was well
acquainted with the consequences (\textit{akolouthian}), and connection (\textit{eirmon}),
and reciprocal dependence of the causes of things, inasmuch as he was a
philosophical man, accustomed to converse with God.\textsuperscript{450}
\end{quote}

This passage contains the elements related to the Stoic view of fate: the sequence
(\textit{akolouthia}), the chain of events (\textit{eirmos}), and the necessity (\textit{anagke}) of causes

\textsuperscript{446} David Dawson, ‘Allegorical Reading and the Embodiment of the Soul in Origen’, in Lewis
Ayres & Gareth Jones (eds), \textit{Christian Origins. Theology, Rhetoric and Community}. London 1998,
31; Ilaria Ramelli, \textit{The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis}, Leiden 2013, 4; See further on
Gregory’s \textit{apokatastasis} in Mario Baghos, ‘Reconsidering \textit{apokatastasis} in St Gregory of Nyssa’s
thorough study on the topic is by Ilaria Ramelli, \textit{The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis}.


\textsuperscript{448} Ari Ojell, \textit{One Word, One Body, One Voice}, 33n56.


between them. It is rather peculiar here how Philo manages to connect the Stoic concept with Moses. The passages shows, as Geljon has noted, that Philo saw Moses as an ideal Stoic sage. Knowing this, it would be logical to assume that Philo was the main source of Gregory’s concept of *akolouthia*.

Scholars Richard A. Norris and Ari Ojell agree with Daniélou that Gregory in deed was influenced by Philo in this matter and was not familiar of the Stoic sources themselves. Also Geljon has noted the Philonic origin of the terms *akolouthia* and *eirmos*. Norris and Geljon are both pointing to the similarity of thought between Philo’s *On the Creation* and Gregory’s apology on his brother Basil’s *Hexaemeron*. Gregory agrees here with Philo that, in the beginning, the cosmos was created by God “at one moment and without interval of time” (*ex nihilio*). Gregory writes:

> By his power and will each and every part of the cosmos achieves its end, following (επεκολουθησεν) a certain determined (αναγκαῖος) chain of events (είρμος) and order (ταξίν) so that fire both comes first and follows everything else. Afterwards by necessity there succeeds a third order as the Creator foreordained; then comes the fourth and fifth orders and the rest in their proper sequence (*akolouthias*), not appearing by mindless fortune according to a certain disorder and fate. Instead, a necessary (αναγκαία) order of nature (φυσιος ταξίν) follows with regard to the sequence (*akolouthon*) of created beings so that the [Genesis] narrative speaks about each nature which has come into existence. God's productive words bring each being into existence as befitting him; all are according to a series (εἱρμον) which are in line with God's wisdom whose voice is direct.

Gregory argues here in a similar manner as Philo that the cosmos was created according to a certain series of events (*eirmos*) that naturally follow (*akolouthia*) each other. Everything is created “in line with God’s wisdom”, so there cannot be disorder in the process.

Ramelli states that *akolouthia* is a “momentous structural parallel between Philo’s and Origen’s Biblical exegesis.” Meredith, on the other hand, states that Origen employed *akolouthia*, but not as a principal concept, in comparison with Gregory. In this matter I would recommend David Dawson’s thorough analysis.

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452 Ari Ojell, *One Word, One Body, One Voice*, 33n56.
on Origen’s use of *akolouthia* in allegorical reading. According to Dawson, Origen developed his concept of *akolouthia* on the basis of a Stoic idea, that all items in the cosmos are metaphysically and logically connected and follow the order established in creation. This connection is discernible also in the language. According to Dawson, Origen’s model of *akolouthia* has three aspects:

1. literal/historical sequence of a narrative,
2. sequence formed by the details of allegorical interpretation (the meta-narrative, which treats the details of the historical narrative as a sequence of signs), and
3. logical connection of the first two.

Dawson argues that there is a temptation among scholars to treat Origen’s model in a dualistic manner (and disregard the 3rd layer). Origen’s model here in Dawson’s opinion is not literalistic (focused only on the 1st layer) or anti-literalistic (concerned only with the 2nd). Origen uses the term *eirmos*, in addition with *akolouthia*, to refer to coherence between the ‘body’ (the realm of the senses) and the ‘spirit’ (the inner meaning of the text), which is also evident in Gregory’s exegesis.\(^\text{457}\) It seems that *akolouthia* was a key factor in Origen’s exegesis, not only as a minor concept, as Meredith argues, and Gregory seems to have been influenced by Origen’s concept. The difference with Philo and Origen is the pneumatic anagogy that Origen applies in his *akolouthia*. Anagogy became also a key concept also in Gregory’s exegesis, most likely due to Origen’s influence.

Frances M. Young has noted that the Antiochene Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia were also applying *akolouthia* in their exegesis. Diodore was concerned with the logical coherence (*akolouthia*) of the words of a text.\(^\text{458}\) Theodore, on the other hand, stressed in his *Commentary on the Psalms* as follows: “A true understanding, in fact, results in such an insight that we should maintain a sequence of explanation in faithful accord with history, and accordingly should propose what ought to be said.”\(^\text{459}\) Harry S. Pappas has noted that Theodore’s exegesis is almost entirely concerned with the historical sense of the biblical text rather than its theoria. Pappas stresses that Theodore’s *akolouthia*

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“does not merely refer to the "bare" text as it stands, but to its logical order and interpreted meaning.”

Conclusively, it has been shown that the concept of akolouthia is a key element in the tradition of ancient cosmology as well as in Alexandrian, Cappadocian, and Antiochene Biblical exegesis, and requires further research in order to understand the subtle differences in the use of the concept between different authors, whether they are Greek, Jewish, or Christian. Gregory, however, is one of the key figures in the development of the method, applying the concept of *akolouthia* frequently and consistently throughout his works.

### 4.3. Akolouthia in The Life of Moses

Ari Ojell has stressed that despite of the philosophical origins of *akolouthia*, it is primarily for Gregory a central Biblical term, based on the tradition of following Christ. Gregory’s *akolouthia* can be seen as an answer to Jesus’s calling to follow him (Luke 18:22, *akolouthei moi*). Gregory is for Gregory a concept of constructing a model of imitation (*mimesis*), as Graham Ward describes it.

Gregory states in *On Perfection*: “If we are to become the invisible God’s image, we must model the form of our life upon the pattern given us (Jn 13.15).”

In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory describes his model as an outline of “perfect life for men”, and sets Moses in his treatise as an example of imitation. Seeing Moses as an example of virtue is a theme already presented in Philo’s *On the Life of Moses*, which shows that Gregory might have adopted the idea from Philo’s treatise. Philo stated in his commentary that Moses “was devoting himself to all the labours of virtue (*arete*), having a teacher within himself, virtuous reason, by whom he had been trained to the most virtuous pursuits of life”. Philo presents Moses as someone who has devoted himself to *arete*, the same word that Gregory uses as the aim of his treatise with a similar title.

The aim of Gregory’s model in *The Life of Moses* is “perfection in virtue” (*areten teleiothetos*), which is an answer of the soul to the calling of Matt. 5:48, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (*teleios*)” (NRSV 1989). It is an exhortation that in Gregory’s opinion should not be disregarded, although

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perfection cannot be fully attained by a mortal individual.\textsuperscript{465} The term that Gregory uses as the aim of his model is *arete*, meaning virtue, excellence or goodness. *Arete* is also a Biblical term, which appears in Phil. 4:8\textsuperscript{466} and 2. Peter 1:5.\textsuperscript{467}

In the Prologue of *The Life of Moses*, Gregory compares striving for virtue with horse racing. The term *arete* is commonly used with the connotation of excellence in sports and competing.\textsuperscript{468} Gregory most likely refers here to Plato’s chariot allegory, in which the winged horses and their charioteers represent souls reaching upwards towards the heavenly realities.\textsuperscript{469} We know for a fact that Gregory knew this allegory, since he knew well Plato’s *Phaedrus*,\textsuperscript{470} and he is referring to the allegory in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*.\textsuperscript{471} Gregory uses common metaphor, calling the unceasing strive for virtue as a “divine race”.\textsuperscript{472} In Gregory’s view, there is an aspect of training involved in the process of Moses striving towards virtue, which is also apparent in Philo’s model.\textsuperscript{473} Urbano sees Gregory’s “divine race” as a metaphor of the debate between different religious and philosophical groups. The competition involves conceptions of different religions as well as the competition against Christian heretic groups. The main attributes of Gregory’s virtuous life is to withdraw from idolatry and to avoid mistaken apprehensions of the nature of God.\textsuperscript{474} Gregory did not want to refute Greek *paidea* altogether, as some Fathers such as Irenaeus and Tertullian, had done before him, but to correct the mistaken apprehensions of his predecessors with the help of Scripture.\textsuperscript{475}

For Gregory, God is both the guide and the aim towards virtue, since God for Gregory is the Good, the absolute virtue. Therefore, the likeness to God is the

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item \textsuperscript{465} Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. A. J. Malherbe & E. Ferguson, 1.1, 1.9, 1.15.
  \item \textsuperscript{466} "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence (arete) and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” NRSV 1989.
  \item \textsuperscript{467} "For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge” NRSV 1989.
  \item \textsuperscript{468} Homer, *The Odyssey*, 4.625.
  \item \textsuperscript{469} Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246A–257B.
  \item \textsuperscript{470} Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, 3.7.33–34.
  \item \textsuperscript{471} Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 49C–52A.
  \item \textsuperscript{472} Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. A. J. Malherbe & E. Ferguson, 1.1.
  \item \textsuperscript{473} “If, on the other hand, he (Moses) had been strengthened by the illumination of the light and had received such strength and power against his enemies, then, as one who has developed as an athlete by strenuous practice under his trainer, he would boldly and confidently strip for the contest with his opponents. With that rod, the word of faith, in his hand, he would prevail against the Egyptian serpents.” ibid. 2.36.
  \item \textsuperscript{474} Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 2.14, 2.23.
  \item \textsuperscript{475} Arthur P. Urbano, *The Philosophical Life*, 113, 122.
\end{itemize}
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aim of the progress of someone striving towards virtue. For the Stoics, arete consists of the development of human nature. Gregory’s view of arete is different from the Stoics since the development is focused on participation with God, a concept that has been thoroughly discussed by Balás in his study Metousia Theou.⁴⁷⁶

For the Christian exegetes before Gregory, Moses was traditionally seen as a type of Christ or type of the law. Manlio Simonetti has seen that in Gregory’s The Life of Moses, Moses has become “a symbol of the soul which follows the arduous ascent that leads to perfection.”⁴⁷⁷ According to Gregory’s principal of epektasis, absolute virtue can never be fully attained, since God’s nature is unlimited and infinite; human nature “does not admit of an entire and exact imitation” of its divine ideal.⁴⁷⁸ Therefore, the process of epektasis continues the whole lifetime. Gregory holds Paul as an example of epektasis, since he never ceased but kept on “striving forward to what lies ahead” (Phil. 3:13). Even though perfection is unattainable, Gregory insists that one must not cease from pursuing the qualities that are associated with virtue. On the contrary, virtues must be pursued as much as possible.⁴⁷⁹ This kind of mentality is based on earlier exhortation by Plato.⁴⁸⁰ Gregory is well aware of the limitations of human nature by saying: “We imitate those qualities we can assume while we venerate and worship what our nature cannot imitate.”⁴⁸¹ Gregory himself is also aware of the problem of the definition of mimesis falling too much into exactitude:

Those who emulate their lives, however, cannot experience the identical literal events... Because therefore it has been shown to be impossible to imitate the marvels of these blessed men in these exact events, one might substitute a moral teaching for the literal sequence in those things which admit of such an approach. In this way those who have been striving toward virtue may find aid in living the virtuous life.⁴⁸²

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⁴⁷⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Moses, 1.1, 1.3, 1.5, 1.7, 1.9, 1.15.
⁴⁸⁰ “For by the gods assuredly that man will never be neglected who is willing and eager to be righteous, and by the practice of virtue to be likened unto god so far as that is possible for man.” Plato, Republic, trans. Paul Shorey, 613A–B.
Gregory’s *mimesis* is aiming for representation of virtuous characteristics, not exact copying of historical events.

*Akolouthia* is a concept that can be applied also to the interpretation of Scripture. Gregory sees it as a way of following the Word.\(^{483}\) It is a crucially important matter for Gregory to remind the reader of keeping in mind the overall connected sequence of the details of the narrative and the allegorical meta-narrative,\(^{484}\) as well as making sure that the interpretation is not deviating from that sequence.\(^{485}\) Here Gregory explains the concept of his *akolouthia* in *The Life of Moses* 2.39:

> I think that if someone who has been initiated under the guidance of the history follow (*akolouthian*) closely the order (*heirmenon*) of the historical figures (*ainigmaton*), the sequence (*akolouthos*) of the development in virtue (*areten*) marked out in our account will be clear.\(^{486}\)

Gregory is writing here about the spiritual sense (*theoria*), and about the sequence of the meta-narrative or double narrative, which is development in virtue. The details of the sequence are called *ainigmata* (figures, enigmas, symbols or types), which are based on the details in a certain historical narrative, but have a new anagogical meaning. The meaning of the enigmas and their connection is revealed to an interpreter who is *initiated* in anagogical interpretation, and therefore is capable of following the spiritual sequence. Being initiated in the context of *The Life of Moses* means for Gregory someone who has gone through the process of purification\(^{487}\) (to be in a state where clinging to one’s emotions and attachment to material things has been left behind), and ascended to the mountain (‘lifted up’ into the ascent of spiritual contemplation). Gregory sees Moses as a mystagogue (Gregory often uses the terms *myeo*, *myesis* or *mystagogia*\(^{488}\)), who has been initiated to divine mysteries by his divine encounter on the mountain, and by receiving the model of the tabernacle.\(^{489}\) What makes this interesting is that

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\(^{483}\) Ari Ojell, *One Word, One Body, One Voice*, 35.


\(^{485}\) “Nor is this outside the sequence (*akolouthias*) of things contemplated (*theorethenton*).” ibid. 2.150; “let us not think that this is at variance with the sequence of what has been perceived” ibid. 2.188.

\(^{486}\) ibid. 2.39.

\(^{487}\) ibid. 1.42.

\(^{488}\) See **μυέω** (initiate), **μυησις** (initiation, mystery, revelation, instruction) and **μυσταγογια** (initiation into mysteries, revelation of mystery, veiled teaching, mystical expression of a truth) in G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*.

Gregory is using similar terminology as a Neoplatonist would do. After being purified, a Neoplatonic mystagogue is initiated to the sacred mysteries by walking a path to the mountain (oreibasia), and is ‘lifted up’ (anagoge) into the divine realm. It is quite common for the ancient Christian authors to use mystery-terminology in their works.

Zdenko Š. Širka has pointed out that Gregory’s hermeneutics are true anagogy, which means that the interpreter of a text is not merely allegorizing by using his own intellect, but ‘being lifted up’ to a spiritual state, to the realm of contemplative reading. In contemplation, the spiritual meaning beyond the literal and obvious sense is revealed to the interpreter. Gregory instructs in Against Eunomius that the higher spiritual understanding can only be achieved “by the aid of the Holy Spirit” with “the grace of prophecy”, not by own efforts of the interpreter. In The Life of Moses, Gregory stresses that there are actually two guides that lead the ones who are pursuing virtue: Moses and the cloud. Moses here represents the legal precepts, and the cloud (The Holy Spirit) the proper understanding of the law. Therefore, it is clear that, for Gregory, it is not enough to follow the Law of Moses to reach perfection. One needs also the Holy Spirit to show the higher meaning of the text.

One peculiar thing in Gregory’s exegesis is that he does not always stay strictly within the literal/historical sense in Book I of The Life of Moses, but he includes his analogical, metaphysical and mystical interpretations already in the historia. He reveals his interpretation of Moses entering the cloud already in the first part of his treatise, saying that someone who seeks intimacy with God must go beyond all that is visible by “lifting up his mind, as to a mountaintop, to the invisible and incomprehensible”. In addition, Gregory describes Moses and the Israelites approaching Mount Sinai as a most secret initiation (aporretoteras myeseos), and Moses receiving the pattern of the tabernacle as higher initiation (teleioteran mystagogian).

In the following passage, Gregory presents his view of akolouthia in relation to the literal sense:

491 Albert C. Geljon, Philonic Exegesis, 127.
492 Zdenko Š. Širka, ‘The Role of Theoria in Gregory of Nyssa’s Vita Moysis and in Canticum Canticorum’, 143, 145, 158.
495 ibid.1.42, 1.46–47, 1.49.
If the events require dropping from the literal account (*historia*) anything written which is foreign to the sequence (*eirmou*) of elevated understanding (*anegmenes dianoias*), we pass over this on the grounds that it is useless and unprofitable to our purpose, so as not to interrupt (*diakoptein*, cut into two, break off) the guidance to virtue (*aretes*) at such points.\(^{496}\)

The spiritual sense is this time defined as anagogical understanding (*anegmenes dianoias*). Gregory’s primary criterion for evaluating a detail in the narrative is here the *usefulness* of it in the chain of the sequence of *theoria*. Each detail of the sequence is an inevitable cause of the previous detail, and the sequence continues logically step by step. If the logic of *theoria* breaks due to a certain unfitting detail in the *historia*, it may be passed over by the interpreter. Here we can clearly see that the emphasis of Gregory’s exegesis is not the actual events of the narrative, but what we can learn from the events and how we find them useful in our progress towards virtue. As Monique Alexandre has noted, usefulness is not the only reason for Gregory to omit a detail in the sequence. There might be a detail in the narrative that is theologically or morally improper, or physically or logically impossible. In this case, the detail must be omitted, or a spiritual meaning should be sought after.\(^{497}\)

The sequence of *theoria* doesn’t necessarily need to be based on the chronological succession of the historical events. In Gregory’s exegesis, the *theoria* implements a pattern that depicts different stages of spiritual life. This kind of a pattern, as J. A. Gil-Tamayo has noted, may rather follow a different logic than the chronological *historia*, since the pattern is not concerned of the historical events as such but the progression of the soul. Therefore, it is possible for Gregory to cite the Psalms in a non-chronological order in his *Commentary of the Psalms*, and still maintain a logical sequence.\(^{498}\)

**4.4. Klimakos and Bathmoi – The Ladder and the Steps**

In Christian mystical literature, the ladder or the steps are symbols that often are connected with a process of spiritual development, highlighted by mystical union on the highest stage of the process. Also Gregory briefly refers to the symbol of a ladder in *The Life of Moses*:

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

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\(^{496}\) ibid. 2.50.

\(^{497}\) Roland E. Heine, ’Gregory of Nyssa’s Apology for Allegory’, 360.

himself in his upward course. Once having set foot on the ladder (klimakos) which God set up (as Jacob says), he continually climbed to the step (bathmidos) above and never ceased to rise higher, because he always found a step (bathmidos) higher than the one he had attained.  

Gregory connects here two Biblical narratives, the Ladder of Jacob (Gen. 28:10–19) and the ascent of Moses on Mount Sinai, with a symbolic link. The aspect that connects these two narratives is the vertical motion. Gregory explains his concept of *epektasis* using these two Biblical narratives. The steps of the ladder symbolise stages in a never-ceasing process of development of a Christian soul. Moses is set to be the ideal to be imitated, being the man who was able to reach immense heights on the ladder. In Gregory’s model of spiritual ascent, the steps do not form a fixed pattern, since it does not have an end, but the soul continues to rise and decline on the ladder throughout an entire lifetime. According to Gregory, it is the example of Moses which shows that the ascent on the ladder is never-ceasing, unlimited and infinite. The ascent as an infinite process seems to be Gregory’s original idea without precedent.

The symbol of the ladder is already present in his early treatise *On Virginity*, and he develops the idea further in his later works. In his treatise *Commentary on the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, Gregory divides the Book of Psalms to five parts, which signify a gradual ascent of five steps for the soul to attain perfection in virtue. The highest steps of the pattern lead the soul to participation in blessedness with the Good. In the 2nd Homily on the Beatitudes, the Beatitudes are set by Gregory as a series (taxis) of rungs on a ladder, forming a logical sequence (noematon akolouthias), which the mind follows, “by a sort of necessity (anagkaias)”, step by step towards greater heights of “the spiritual mountain of sublime contemplation”.

In these two commentaries, on the Psalms and on the Beatitudes, Gregory uses the ladder as a symbol of akolouthia, his concept of following a pattern of details in Biblical interpretation. Each step of a ladder

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signify a detail on the Biblical narrative, in this case either a psalm or one of the beatitudes, which comprise a logical sequence.\textsuperscript{504}

The question is whether Gregory is thinking of the topographical details of the Exodus narrative as a sequence of steps in a similar manner. I believe he does so. In \textit{The Life of Moses}, Gregory often reminds the reader by providing a sequence of the events that occurred in the previous chapters, for he considers it essential for the reader to keep in mind the order of previous events (\textit{The Life of Moses} 2.136–137, 2.152–153). The longest sequence (2.228–231) is presented after Gregory’s interpretation of the ladder (2.227). Here Gregory makes a compilation of some essential events of the journey of Moses:

He denied the specious kinship with the Egyptian queen.
He avenged the Hebrew.
He chose the desert way of life where there was no human being to disturb him.
In himself he shepherded a flock of tame animals.
He saw the brilliance of the light.
Unencumbered, having taken off his sandals, he made his approach to the light.
He brought his kinsmen and countrymen out to freedom.
He saw the enemy drowning in the sea.
He made camps under the cloud.
He quenched thirst with the rock.
He produced bread from heaven.
By stretching out his hands, he overcame the foreigner.
He heard the trumpet.
He entered the darkness.
He slipped into the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle not made with hands.
He learned the secrets of the divine priesthood.
He destroyed the idol.
He supplicated the divine Being.
He restored the Law destroyed by the evil of the Jews.
He shone with glory.
And although lifted up through such lofty experiences, he is still unsatisfied in his desire for more.\textsuperscript{505}

The sequence of Gregory here contains mostly details of the sequence of the \textit{historia}, but it contains some elements from his \textit{theoria} as well, for example the allusions to the divine priesthood and the divine Being. The attempt to find order and structure in the Scriptures was an essential aspect of exegesis at the time when Gregory of Nyssa was a bishop. Gregory’s succession resembles the creeds that were constructed in discussions among bishops who gathered in the Councils of

\textsuperscript{504} Margaret Beirne, ‘Spiritual Enrichment through Exegesis: St Gregory of Nyssa and the Scriptures’, \textit{Phronema}, vol. 27 (2), 2012, 93.

the Church. Gregory of Nyssa knew the procedure of compiling creeds since he was present when the Creed of Constantinople was compiled in the First Council of Constantinople in 381. The creeds contained the most essential details of a narrative compiled as a sequence. The difference here is that the details are derived from the stages of the life of Moses, using the Pentateuch as a source, and not from the life of Christ presented in the Gospels.

My argument is that the sequence of Gregory clearly shows that Biblical events of the Exodus narrative are seen by Gregory as successive steps, which, in connection with Moses’s ascent on the mountain are compared to rungs of a ladder. At the end of the list, Gregory presents the highest step of his theoria, which is epektasis, the state of dissatisfaction in one’s desire for more. The highest step of Gregory’s ladder, the aim of virtuous life, is defined as participation of Beauty (2.230–232), which is, according to Balás, “not a static relation but rather a progressive process involving change and temporality”.

The question raises here whether Gregory’s model makes a mystical union between Creator and the created possible, since God is for the soul unknowable and infinite even on the highest steps of the ladder. Gregory’s model, however, doesn’t deny the possibility of close immediacy with God. The soul cannot pass the gulf between uncreated and created by its own effort, but it is up to God, who can pass that gulf and make such an experience possible.

The symbol of a ladder appears also in Gregory’s Commentary on the Song of Songs. Gregory applies his method of akolouthia in the 5th Homily of the treatise, in a similar way as in The Life of Moses.

What is the point of this order (taxis) of words in our text? How is one element in it tied in with another? How is the logical sequence (eirmon) of the ideas (noematon) kept connected (akolouthon) as in a chain (alysei)? She hears the command. She is empowered by the Word. She rises up. She moves forward. She is brought close. She becomes a beauty. She is named dove.

Here again Gregory reminds the reader of the overall sequence of events of the narrative, and uses the terminology related to his method of interpretation: taxis, eirmos, and akolouthia. The key elements of the narrative are provided by Gregory as a chain of events. Here we can see the concern of Gregory on how the events are logically connected to each other. After the definition of his method

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506 David L. Balás, Metousia Theou, 141, 153.
and the key elements of the narrative, Gregory describes the experience of the soul on the highest steps of the pattern.

We see, then, that the Bride is being led by the Word through the ascents of virtue (aretes anodon) up to the heights, just as if she were climbing stairs (bathmon anabasei)...Then, when she has shared, as far as is possible for her, in the good things, he draws her towards participation in the transcendent Beauty (hyperkeimenu kallous metousian)...\footnote{ibid. 5.158–159.}

The final aim of the pattern presented here is again participation of Beauty, resembling Plato’s model. This time, though, the soul progresses towards eternal light, and not towards increasing darkness. The soul is brought in a kataphatic manner into immediate nearness with the object of its desire. The model presented here resembles more Origen’s Platonic pattern, which aims towards increasing light; however, the Good is by Gregory again defined as infinite and beyond limit,\footnote{ibid. 5.157.} which is against Origen’s thesis that God cannot be infinite.

Gregory bases his concept of spiritual ascent on a long tradition of ascent symbolism, which appears in Homeric, Platonic, Neoplatonic, Jewish and Christian writings already before him. Werner Jaeger has noted that the origins of Gregory’s spiritual ascent goes back to Hesiod, who in his \textit{Works and Days} writes that the path on the peak of virtue (arete) is long, steep and rough, but gets easier on the top.\footnote{Hesiod, \textit{Works and Days}, 286; Werner Jaeger, \textit{Two Rediscovered Works}, 52.} This example shows that already Hesiod was using an image of an ascent to a mountain top as a metaphor of striving for virtue.

Gregory’s concept of the ladder as an orderly succession, which leads the soul to the participation of Beauty, has its origin in Plato’s \textit{Symposium}. In his \textit{Symposium}, Plato presents a model of contemplation of the form of Beauty, which is described as an ascent that follows “order and succession” (ephexes te kai orthos), as if climbing on the rungs of a ladder (epanabasmois). In the top of Plato’s model, the soul “comes to know the very essence of beauty”.\footnote{Plato, \textit{Symposium}, trans. H. N. Fowler, 210E, 211C–D.} Even though Gregory’s model is deeply influenced by Platonic tradition, it also differs significantly from Plato’s model. Plato’s model here is kataphatic, while in Gregory’s apophatic model, the true essence of Beauty is unattainable for man.\footnote{Andrew Louth, \textit{The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition}, 81.}
Philo presents in his treatise *On Dreams* an interpretation of Jacob’s ladder as well.\(^\text{514}\)

And perhaps too the practiser of virtue represents his own life as like to a ladder; for the practice of anything is naturally an anomalous thing, since at one time it soars up to a height, and at another it turns downwards in a contrary direction; and at one time has a fair voyage like a ship, and at another has but an unfavourable passage; for, as some one says, the life of those who practise virtue is full of vicissitudes…\(^\text{515}\)

Philo sees Moses as a practicer (asketes) of virtue who is reaching up towards the heavenly realities. The ladder symbolises ups and downs that one experiences on a path aiming for virtuous life. In another treatise *On Rewards and Punishments*, Philo sees the ladder as a sequence of stages that people go through in different periods of their lives:

> But the human being proceeding upwards from childhood, as it were by the different stages of a ladder, and at the appointed periods of time fulfilling the regularly determined boundaries of each age, will eventually arrive at the last of all, that which is near to death, or rather to immortality.\(^\text{516}\)

In addition to the direct influence of Philo’s ladder symbolism, I suggest that Gregory’s ladder is also indebted to Origen’s exegesis. Origen knew Philo’s interpretation of the ladder presented in *On Dreams*, and recommended this treatise for his readers.\(^\text{517}\) However, the theme of the ladder in Origen’s exegesis is rare; he more often uses the symbol of ascending steps. The same tendency applies also to Gregory’s exegesis, as noted by Malherbe and Ferguson.\(^\text{518}\) In *Homilies on Numbers*, the journey of the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land is set by Origen to represent certain stages of life in the inner path of a soul.\(^\text{519}\) The soul progresses by ascending on the steps of faith and virtue, one by one, aiming for perfection.\(^\text{520}\) In a similar way as in Origen’s *Homilies on Exodus*, the place of a Christian soul is in the desert; here it is being trained in the divine

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\(^\text{514}\) Gen. 28:12 “And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.” NRSV 1989; Philo of Alexandria, *On Dreams, that They Are God-Sent*, Book I, trans. C.D. Yonge, 22 (133).


\(^\text{517}\) “On this subject Philo has composed a treatise which deserves the thoughtful and intelligent investigation of all lovers of truth.” Origen, *Against Celsus*, trans. Frederick Crombie, 6.21.


\(^\text{520}\) “…let us now strive to go forward and to ascend one by one each of the steps of faith and the virtues. If we dwell on them for such a long time until we come to perfection, we will be said to have made a stage at each of the steps of the virtues until, when we reach the height of our instruction and the summit of our progress, the promised inheritance is fulfilled.” ibid. 3.2.
commandments and tested by temptations. When the soul advances in virtue, it will become “more fully enlightened, until it grows accustomed to endure looking on the “true light” itself…” Here Origen presents his kataphatic model, rooted in Platonism, aiming for continuous contemplation on the true light. In a similar way as in Gregory’s *The Life of Moses*, the soul ascends step by step towards perfection in virtue. Origen’s focus here is not the journey of Moses as a model of imitation as in Gregory’s treatise, but rather the journey of the Israelites. The model contrasts with Gregory’s model, since the soul advances from darkness to light, and not vice versa as in Gregory’s succession. Gregory’s treatise ends with the narrative of the death of Moses; however, the succession of Moses’s ascent upwards has no end. Origen’s final step, however, is the Promised Land, the final destination of the Israelites, which is a symbol of true contemplation of God.

Although the focus of Gregory’s treatise is on Moses, there is another pattern also presented by Gregory. O’Connell has noted that there are not one but two patterns, *vertical* and *horizontal*. The vertical pattern, the ascent or the ladder, is concentrated on Moses’s ascents into union (or into ever closer participation, as Gregory would express it) with God, and the horizontal pattern represents the journey of the Israelites. The vertical pattern, therefore, could as well be defined as *anagogical* pattern, since it concentrates on the lifting-up motion of the spiritual ascent. Since the pattern focuses on Moses’s theophanies, it may be defined as a *theophanic* pattern. Gregory’s vertical pattern has no exact final step (*telos*), due to the infinity of God’s nature; the process of participation leads the soul to ever-increasing darkness. However, the aim (*telos*) of the horizontal pattern is, as in Origen’s pattern, the Promised Land.\(^522\)

Gregory states in *The Life of Moses* that it was Joshua who became the successor of Moses as the leader and war general of the Israelites, and led the people to the Promised Land. Gregory says that the violent strategy of Joshua in the war against Amalek is unfit for battle in real conflicts, and therefore the event requires search of a higher meaning. Joshua is here interpreted as a *typos* of Jesus, since they both have the same name (in Greek both Joshua and Jesus are called *Iesous*). The narrative of Joshua leading battle represents Jesus, who is the war general for Christians in spiritual battle, leading his followers to the final aim of

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\(^{521}\) Origen, ibid. 5.1–5.2.

the journey of a soul, the heavenly Jerusalem. This figure has its origin already in *The Epistle of Barnabas* 12.8, and developed further by Origen.\(^{523}\)

The question is, what the Promised Land represents in Gregory’s pattern of steps? In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory sets the heavenly kingdom or “Jerusalem that is above” as the ultimate prize of the divine race.\(^{524}\) The final goal of Gregory’s pattern is *apokatastasis*, the final restoration of all beings to God, their source and creator. Gregory sees that those who have only been inclined to the Egyptian way of life (representing life inclined to the passions) must, after death, go through a process of retribution (*kolasis*) by fire in Gehenna before being able to enter the heavenly kingdom. For Gregory, the corrective process of *kolasis* is not eternal, but all beings eventually return to their creator.\(^{525}\)

4.5. The Stages of the Lowlands in Gregory’s Topographical Pattern

In this subchapter I will provide an analysis of the stages of the lowlands in Gregory’s topographical pattern presented in *The Life of Moses*. There has been attempts by scholars to elucidate the logic of Gregory’s complex sequences. I will make an analysis of these structures with the use Gregory’s own patterns presented in *The Life of Moses* and the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*.

Patrick O’Connell has conducted a thorough and detailed research of Gregory’s patterns in his article ‘The Double Journey in Saint Gregory of Nyssa: *The Life of Moses*’. O’Connel has come to the conclusion that there are “two distinct yet interrelated spiritual journeys being described in *The Life of Moses*.”

1. Vertical
   – The pattern towards perfection, which concentrates on Moses’s ascents to ever-higher participation with God.

2. Horizontal
   – The pattern represented by the journey of the Israelites toward the promised land.

O’Connell states: “It is the complex, shifting interaction between these two journeys, rather than the spiritual experience of Moses alone, which forms the subject matter and provides the shape of *The Life of Moses*.”\(^{526}\) The scholars have


\(^{524}\) ibid. 2.246–247.

\(^{525}\) ibid. 2.82–83.

mainly focused on the first pattern of O’Connell’s model, since it is concentrated on the spiritual ascent and mystical union, as Gregory emphasised himself, given that the focus of the treatise is Moses, not the Israelites. The notion of O’Connell is interesting, since it shows that Gregory’s pattern has two aims (the spiritual ascent and the promised land), not only one. The interaction between these two patterns is quite intriguing but not easy to get a hold of.

I would add to this that there is also a third dimension and aim to Gregory’s treatise, the pattern focusing on Gregory’s Christological interpretations, since according to Gregory, the one who follows Moses, also follows Christ simultaneously. This dimension is the focal point of Ari Ojell’s research.\(^{527}\)

O’Connell sees the pattern beginning from Moses’s birth and going through Moses’s childhood and early adulthood as the first part of the pattern of the soul, which precedes the vision of the burning bush. For O’Connell, this pattern signifies “a preparatory, pre-conversion period”.\(^{528}\)

This preparatory phase begins with the soul choosing virtue over vice (the birth of Moses). The soul goes through profane education (symbolised by Pharaoh’s daughter), which is guided by the teaching of the Church (symbolised by Moses’s Hebrew mother). After receiving profane education the soul then comes into conflict with idolatry (Moses slaying the Egyptian), and heretical doctrines (two Hebrews fighting), and then leaves them behind. It is, of course, natural for Gregory to see idolatry as the main cause of conflict, since it was not that long ago, when Christians were suffering from persecutions by the Roman Empire because of their beliefs. Gregory’s great grandfather died as a martyr during these persecutions.\(^{529}\)

I see in the first stages described here already elements of moral purification.\(^{530}\) The soul thus becomes aware of its own dependence on Egyptian wealth, pleasures and materialism. After coming into conflict with the values of the prevailing society, the soul then withdraws into seclusion from society (Moses fleeing to the desert of Midian) to be among like-minded souls. This phase is highlighted on the mountain (the episode of the burning bush), where the spiritual

\(^{527}\) Ari Ojell, *One Word, One Body, One Voice*, 177.


\(^{530}\) “The fight of the Egyptian against the Hebrew is like the fight of idolatry against true religion, of licentiousness against self-control, of injustice against righteousness, of arrogance against humility, and of everything against what is perceived by its opposite.” Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. A. J. Malherbe & E. Ferguson, 2.14.
senses of the soul are awakened, and the soul receives its first immediate
encounter with God, and enters the first stage of intellectual purification.\(^531\) I
would divide the first episode of O’Connell into four sections according to the
topographical terrains that Moses goes through. The first phase would be related to
the terrain of the river (Moses as an infant), the second phase would be Moses’s
childhood and youth in Egypt, the third phase would signify Moses’s life as a
shepherd in the desert, and the final fourth phase would be the first theophany on
the mountain (see the chart, pp. 129–134).

In *The Life of Moses* 2.54–55, Gregory focuses on two phases of his
sequence, the meaning of the first theophany and the exodus as deliverance of the
Israelites from slavery. Gregory sees that Moses was strengthened by the light of
the theophany so that he could convince multitudes of people to attempt an
“escape from their wretched labor of brick making”. The narrative teaches
according to Gregory that the soul must go through a long and exacting spiritual
training as a preparatory process before entering a position of leadership. Moses
speaking to multitudes of people about deliverance represents a beginning of a
phase of leadership. The shift from the 1\(^{st}\) theophany to the exodus of the
Israelites (phases 4–7) then signifies the transition of an individual Christian to the
position of priesthood. The focus of the narrative is no longer merely on Moses
and his personal growth, but on the collective experience of the Israelites, as
O’Connell has noted.\(^532\) Therefore I see Moses’s return to Egypt after the first
theophany as the starting point of a new collective phase, which has its peak on
the second theophany (phases 5–10 on the chart).

The Red Sea (phase 8) represents a transitional phase between Egypt (which
signifies total ignorance and wickedness) and the desert (which signifies the battle
against the passions). Gregory’s demand that no remnant of evil mix with
subsequent life after baptism should not be interpreted too rigidly here, given that
the following phases of Gregory’s model, the desert and the campsites, as well as
the preparation for the ascent on the mountain, and even the symbol of the brazen
serpent (phase 13), which is situated after the third theophany (phase 12), involve
stages of moral purification.

After the crossing of the Red Sea, the Israelites (Christians) go through the
process of purification of the passions in the desert (Phase 9: the episodes of

\(^{531}\) Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 2.16, 2.18–2.19; Patrick F. O’Connell, ‘The Double
Journey’, 305.

Marah, palm trees, rock, manna, and war with Amalek). Moses then goes through challenges that are related to the position of the leader of the flock. Going through these episodes the soul reaches a certain maturity and self-control, and is therefore capable of leading others.\footnote{Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{The Life of Moses}, 2.148.}  

Werner Jaeger has presented a threefold model of Gregory’s stages of purification as an outline of philosophical life.

1. Gradual purification of the soul from the stain of the material world.
2. Liberation from the servitude to the passions.
3. Complete freedom of the passions (\textit{apatheia}).\footnote{Werner Jaeger, \textit{Two Rediscovered Works}, 78–79.}

Jaeger’s threefold pattern depicts the stages of Gregory’s sequence of moral purification. The aim of the model is true ascesis, the life of a perfect Christian. Harmonizing this with Gregory’s topographical model presented in \textit{The Life of Moses} is not a simple matter, since there are references to purification throughout the treatise. The stages of Jaeger’s pattern are most fitting in connection with the terrain of the desert. The first two stages of Jaeger’s model describe a position in which the soul has already entered a phase of purification of the passions and material life, which seems to suggest that the soul has already left Egypt behind. The third stage, \textit{apatheia}, is connected with the preparatory process that is completed only by Moses (and not the Israelites) at the foot of the mountain before entering the second theophany (phase 10). Even though the Israelites are completing the same journey as Moses, they must remain on the foot of the mountain, since they are still controlled by the passions and have not entered the practice of \textit{apatheia}. The third stage is possible to achieve only for exceptional men such as Moses, and as Gregory himself attests, for majority of people it is not possible to reach this phase during their lifetime. For Gregory, completing the steps on the desert (phase 9) is obligatory for the soul to be prepared for “the contemplation of transcendent nature”.\footnote{Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{The Life of Moses}, trans. Malherbe & Ferguson, 2.152.} Jaeger’s pattern emphasises praxis and the moral aspect of Gregory’s model, and does not contain references to Gregory’s intellectual purification, contemplation or the spiritual ascent.

The final stages of the journey shows a great contrast between the spiritual paths of Moses and the Israelites. Moses, who has been elevated to a higher awareness of God and has reached immense heights on the divine ladder, must
descend from the mountain. Moses has to face the reality of a spiritual leader who is already practicing *apatheia*, being free of the passions, but needs to return and regain control of his flock (practicing *metriopatheia*), which is still severely bound by the passion of idolatry (the episode of the golden calf, phase 11). This episode signifies a beginning of a new phase that is highlighted by the third theophany, the episode of the cleft of the rock (phase 12).

The next phase (phase 13) takes Moses and the Israelites back to the desert wanderings. The Israelites, again, are struggling in the desert with several passions, such as envy, gluttony, unbelief, arrogance, and licentiousness. Gregory concludes that the Israelites are unable to keep up with the steps of Moses, but are inclined to the Egyptian pleasures. The Israelites had made the same physical journey as Moses, but on their inner journey it seems many of them are struggling with various passions in the desert, and some of them didn’t even leave Egypt behind. The narrative of Gregory ends on Moses’s final ascent and death on Mount Nebo (phase 14). Since the focus of his treatise is Moses, Gregory leaves the narrative of the Israelites’s journey to the promised land under the command of Joshua undiscussed.

According to Origen, Moses was not allowed to enter the land of promise, since he is the type of the law, and by following only the law one cannot reach his ultimate goal. The death of Moses, therefore, represents the death of the law. Following Joshua, on the other hand, the soul is able to reach his final destination, the promised land, since Joshua is a type of Jesus. For Origen, the baptism that the Israelites go through by crossing the Red Sea is something “salty”, while baptism by crossing the Jordan under the command of Joshua (Jesus) is sweet. For Gregory, Joshua is a *typos* of Jesus as well, but otherwise his interpretation differs greatly from Origen’s. For Gregory, Moses’s path is not in any way lacking or “salty” for Christians to follow, as it is for Origen. O’Connell has rightly noted that according to Gregory, Moses was not deprived of entry into the promised land for any fault, but as a faithful servant and a friend of God, preferred to live what flowed from above and did not need an earthly reward as a motivation for

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536 ibid. 2.256–263.
537 ibid. 2.264.
538 ibid. 2.266.
539 ibid. 2.280–282.
540 ibid. 2.302.
541 ibid. 2.271.
virtue. The end of the journey of Moses, whose aim is not earthly, but heavenly
Jerusalem, is “an end which is not covered by a tomb”. The pattern that Moses
follows has a vertical focus, not horizontal. It is aiming for the never-ending
participation with God; therefore Moses’s journey doesn’t have a definite ending
at all. 543

4.6. Gregory’s Imagery of Darkness and Light in Scholarly Discussion
Traditionally, the progress of a soul has been seen as a journey from darkness to
light, towards a greater awareness of God. This structure is found in several
Biblical passages544, early Jewish Haggadic writings,545 and is the basis of
Origen’s kataphatic pattern. The pattern of Origen’s topographical exegesis is
presented in the 3rd Homily on Exodus as follows:

And you, therefore, unless you ascend the “mountain of God” and “go to
meet Moses” there, that is unless you ascend the lofty understanding of
the Law, unless you mount up to the peak of spiritual understanding,
your mouth has not been opened by the Lord. If you stand in the lowly
place of the letter and connect the text of the story with Jewish narratives,
you have not gone to meet Moses “on the mountain of God,” nor has God
“opened your mouth” nor “instructed you in what you must say.” 546

Here Origen presents a twofold model of exegesis, using topography to
demonstrate his anagogical method of interpreting the Law of Moses. The
lowlands represent literal interpretation of the Law, whereas the ascent of Moses
on the mountain represents the spiritual sense. Gregory presents his own twofold
model in The Life of Moses, in which Moses’s outstretched hands represent the
higher meaning of the law, and Moses lowering his hands represent literal
interpretation.547 Gregory therefore uses a different allegory to describe his
twofold system of exegesis.

However, in the same chapter, Origen presents his outline of a topographical
pattern of the Exodus narrative. Origen urges people to “go forth from Egypt” and

543 Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Moses, 2.313, 2.317, 2.320; Patrick F. O’Connell, ’The Double
544 Ps. 43:3 “Send out your light (phos) and your truth (aletheian); let them guide me. Let them
lead me to your holy mountain, to the place where you live.” NLT 2015; John 3:21 “But whoever
lives by the truth (aletheian) comes into the light (phos)” NIV 2011; 1 John 1:7 “But if we walk in
the light (photi), as he is in the light (photi), we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of
Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” NIV 2011.
545 “He has brought us forth from slavery to joy, from mourning to holyday, from darkness to great
light, and from bondage to redemption.” Cecil Roth (trans), The Haggadah. A New Edition,
London 1959, 37.
547 Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Moses, 2.149.
“ascend the mountain of God”, “not in space, but in the soul; not by setting out on a journey, but by advancing in faith.” Ascent to a mountain is used symbolically to depict the vertical lifting up momentum of anagogical interpretation. The lifting up is made within the interpreter’s soul, not in “physical mobility in geographical space”.

Here Origen presents his own description of inner geography or interiorizing Scripture. Origen’s description is reminiscent of Gregory’s explanation that the one who is physically living in Egypt or Babylon is not automatically exiled from the life of virtue, and that the one who is living in Judaea is not necessarily living closer to God. The actual Biblical locations may be inspiring for believers, but for Origen and Gregory, their physical essence does not have much significance in terms of spiritual growth. However, they may function as symbolic landmarks in the inner life of a Christian aiming for virtue.

Anders-Christian Jacobsen concludes in his study of Origen’s geographical symbolism that “the realities of geographical space and place did not mean much to Origen”. Origen’s emphasis truly is on the spiritual sense, which probably tells about the audience that his teaching was meant for; his works were aimed at schooled people who had already studied the literal sense and were already experienced in theological and philosophical debate. It is, nevertheless, not fair to say that he did not care for the actual locations of the original Biblical narrative, because, despite his allegorizing, locations such as Egypt and Mount Sinai were for him real locations, and the narrative of the Exodus is to him real history. He cites the original passages of the Scriptures fluently and often, which shows that he clearly knows the literal sense extremely well. In fact, Simonetti argues that Origen gave more weight to literal sense than anyone before him. Origen made it clear that his idea was not to discard the literal sense, but the theoria must have a firm basis in the Scriptures. In addition, Origen was the most accomplished Hebrew scholar of all the Church Fathers. He had an emphasis on the analysis of the Hebrew names of Biblical geographical locations. Geographical places and spaces presented in the Bible were not indifferent to Origen. In fact there can be seen a fascination towards them in his exegesis.

552 Manlio Simonetti, Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church, 44, 46.
The mountain symbolises for Origen, as well as for Gregory, virtuous life, which is tranquil life free from “the darkness of daily business” of Egyptian city life. The aim of Origen’s model, the mountain top, is a symbol of reaching “the light of knowledge”, the realm of things eternal and invisible, whereas Egypt represents temporality. Here Origen presents his kataphatic pattern, which has momentum from darkness to light. Origen also presents here his view on education: the exodus from Egypt towards Mount Sinai signifies turning away from rational, natural, and moral wisdom (profane education) to the divine laws (spiritual education). One cannot reach the upmost mountain top following only profane rational education, but it must be left behind in order to reach the heights of true knowledge.

This kataphatic outline of Origen has greatly influenced the development of Gregory’s interpretation of the topographical imagery of Exodus. Gregory, however, presents a contradictory development of the sequence. When the soul progresses to a higher level of awareness, it realises its limits: the darkness that Moses enters on the mountain becomes a symbol of God’s incomprehensible nature. Moses therefore advances from light (phase 4 on the chart) to ever-increasing darkness of God (phase 10).

According to Jean Daniélou, Gregory presents two ways: (1) the way of light for beginners and (2) the way of darkness for the advanced believers. Daniélou divides the sequence of Gregory into two parts. He sees the way of light as a process, where the soul is first bound by darkness of unknowing and sin, symbolised by Egypt, and progresses towards higher awareness of God, symbolised by the light of the burning bush, Moses’s first encounter with God. Gregory in fact uses himself the terms “darkness of ignorance” (agnoias o zofos) and “darkness of wickedness” (kakias zofos) in connection with Egypt. Remarkable here is that Gregory uses two different terms of darkness, zofos designating the darkness of Egypt, and gnophos signifying divine darkness on Mount Sinai. The difference of Gregory’s two darkesses has been notified by O’Connell, who describes the gloomy darkness of Egypt as ”moral darkness” and the darkness connected with Moses’s mountain experience as “new darkness of an

556 ibid. 2.81.
awareness of the incomprehensibility of God”. A soul who is on a spiritual journey is still covered by the darkness of unknowing, but the soul has attained an awareness of God’s darkness, as opposed to a soul that is still completely bound to Egyptian pleasures and ignorance.

Gregory’s own presentation of darkness and light imagery is shown in The Life of Moses 2.162.

What does it mean that Moses entered the darkness (gnophou) and then saw God in it? What is now recounted seems somehow to be contradictory to the first theophany (theophaneia), for then the Divine was beheld in light (photi) but now he is seen in darkness (gnopho). Let us not think that this is at variance with the sequence (eirmos) of things we have contemplated spiritually (anagogen hemin theorethenton). 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 (eusebeia, piety) is darkness (skotos), and the escape from darkness (skotous) comes about when one participates (metousia) in light (photos). But as the mind (nous) progresses and, through an ever greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality, as it approaches more nearly to contemplation (theoria), it sees more clearly what of the divine nature is uncontemplated (atheoretov).

The kataphatic pattern described by Gregory here is from darkness (this time skotos, not zofos) to participation (metousia) in light (fos). I suggest that this pattern is what Daniélou calls “the way of light”, and is defined as the phase for beginners. It signifies Moses’s journey from the darkness of Egypt, and the aim of this pattern is participation of Being of the first theophany (the burning bush, phase 4 on the chart). The darkness of this pattern (skopos) is for Gregory contrary to Christian piety (life inclined to wickedness, passions, sin and ignorance). This is the pattern reminiscent of Origen’s model, which begins from darkness and has its aim on the mountain, which signifies true knowledge.

The second pattern provided by Gregory contrasts as a pattern from light (fos) to darkness (gnophos). Gregory’s darkness here should not be interpreted as gloomy and threatening. Notable here is that Gregory uses a different term for the threatening and gloomy darkness of Egypt (skotos) than the darkness of the cloud (gnophos). The second pattern signifies the phase of Moses’s journey from the first theophany (the burning bush, phase 4) to the second theophany (the ascent and entering the cloud on Mount Sinai, phase 10). The second pattern begins after the revelation of Moses on the mountain that others must also be saved from

Moses then descends from the mountain, returns back to Egypt (phase 5), and saves the Israelites from Egyptian bondage (phases 6–7). The journey then continues with the desert wanderings of the Israelites, signifying the purification of the soul, and ends when Moses enters the dark cloud (gnophos, phase 10).

Phases 1–4 represent the kataphatic way, which includes the first encounter with God in light and perceiving of the divine attributes. Phases 5–12, however, signify the apophatic way, in which the soul realises that God’s nature is atheoretos, beyond any description of theoria. In addition, phases 5–12 signify the negative way; God’s essence is beyond any divine attribute, beyond any description.

The method of interpretation is here described by Gregory as anagogy, “lifting up”, which is well-suited here, for Moses’s ascent on the mountain therefore becomes a symbol of a soul that uplifts his mind (nous) into a higher spiritual state. The soul progresses towards higher apprehension of Being when it advances deeper into the darkness. The darkness (gnophos) is described as luminous (lampros),

which brings a kataphatic element into Gregory’s model. I see a hint of criticism by Gregory here against the kataphatic model, represented by Eunomius, which to Gregory is too self-assured. However, Gregory doesn’t dismiss the kataphatic model altogether. It must be apprehended at this point that the narrative of Gregory doesn’t end on the mountain, but the journey continues until Moses’s death, which makes Daniélou’s model rather limited as it focuses mostly on Moses’s ascents.

According to Andrew Louth and several other scholars, Gregory’s way of the darkness completely contrasts with Origen’s sequence, in which the soul pursues a path from darkness to increasing light. This is the reason why Gregory has been presented as one of the great ‘mystics of darkness’. However, Martin Laird argues that Gregory could as well be called as a ‘mystic of light’. In the 7th chapter of his book, Greg of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith, Laird goes through passages where Gregory is using the way of light as a pattern of Christian life towards God. The way towards increasing light is emphasised on the Commentary of Song of Songs, as Laird admits himself, whereas the way towards increasing

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559 ibid. 2.163.
darkness is more dominant in connection with Gregory’s apophatic mountain imagery in *The Life of Moses*.560

Philip Kariatlis agrees with Laird that the way of light presents an equally important role in Gregory’s mysticism as the way of darkness. However, Kariatlis criticises Laird for underlining the importance of the way of light “at the expense of downplaying the darkness texts”. Kariatlis argues that either the way of darkness or the way of light should be overemphasised. He stresses that in *The Life of Moses*, the darkness is defined as ‘luminous’; therefore there is an element of light as well in Gregory’s darkness imagery.561 I appreciate Laird for showing that Gregory’s model is not merely apophatic, and Kariatlis for bringing both kataphatic and apophatic elements of Gregory’s mysticism into balance.

A very common way among the scholars is to apply the threefold division provided by Gregory himself in *Commentary on the Song of Songs*.

Moses’ vision of God began with light (photos); afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud (nepheles). But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect, he saw God in the darkness (gnophos).562

Gregory applies here a threefold pattern: 1. light (phos), 2. the cloud (nephele), and 3. darkness (gnophos). To apply this division in relation to *The Life of Moses* is problematic, since the pattern is presented in Gregory’s other treatise, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. The pattern that Gregory present in *The Life of Moses* is much more complex than this threefold pattern.

Malherbe and Ferguson suggest a following solution to the problem of harmonizing the pattern of these two treatises.

If the *Canticles* passage is to be brought into relation to *Vit. Mos.*, we would propose that the "light" is the burning bush, the "cloud" is the Sinai theophany (taking 20-24 as a whole), and the "darkness" is the seeing of the "back" of God while the hand of God shadowed Moses in the cleft of the rock (Exod. 33.20-33). Although the word "darkness" does not occur in the latter, this could be Gregory's interpretation.563


In the end of the analysis, the translators have noticed the problem in the harmonization of these two treatises. Gregory does not use the word *gnophos* in relation to the third theophany. I would also like to add that Gregory never describes the dark cloud on the mountain as *nephele*, but instead it is always associated with the cloudy pillar in the desert, which makes the harmonization even more confusing. The first stage, “light”, certainly matches with the first theophany in *The Life of Moses*. My argument is that stages 2 and 3 of Gregory’s model in *Commentary on the Song of Songs* are both in relation to the second theophany in *The Life of Moses*. The second stage, “the cloud”, clearly is in connection with Moses entering the dark cloud (*gnophos*) on Mount Sinai. There is a reference to penetrating deeper into darkness and seeing God already within the second theophany.\textsuperscript{564} Therefore, there is no need to force connection between the third theophany and with Gregory’s third stage (darkness) of the threefold pattern presented in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*.

Louth has argued that Gregory’s pattern of mystical theology is based on Origen’s threefold pattern, 1. purification – ethics (ethike) 2. illumination – (physike), and 3. contemplation of the Logos (enoitike),\textsuperscript{565} which is presented in the third section of Origen’s prologue of *Commentary on the Song of Songs*.\textsuperscript{566} All in all, I find it rather difficult to harmonise Origen’s model with Gregory’s *The Life of Moses*, since Origen’s pattern is in connection with other books of the Bible and not the Exodus narrative. In Origen’s pattern, *The Book of Proverbs* is a symbol of the first step, *Ecclesiastes* the second, and *The Song of Songs* the third step. The steps are defined by Origen as “the branches of learning”. The first branch (enoitike) is a preparatory phase of purification, which instructs the soul on how to amend one’s behaviour, keep the commandments, and “gives a grounding in habits that incline to virtue” in short maxims or rules of conduct. On Origen’s second branch, the soul is guided to the study of the true nature of things of the phenomenal world. After being engaged in these kinds of studies, the soul finally realises the transitory nature of things in the world. As a result, the soul renounces the world, and proceeds onto the third branch, which is a phase of contemplation of heavenly things, the things invisible and eternal.

\textsuperscript{564} Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 2.163.

\textsuperscript{565} Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 81–82.

Origen’s first step could be connected with Gregory’s step of moral purification, in relation to the symbol of the desert. Origen’s second branch is defined as illumination, which connects better with Gregory’s first theophany. Studies of the phenomenal world and realizing the transitory nature of things would rather connect the second branch with a pattern starting from Moses’s profane studies in Egypt and ending at the departure of the Israelites from Egypt (according to Gregory’s interpretation, the traveller’s equipment of the Israelites symbolises the point of realisation “that our present life is transient”).\textsuperscript{567} Origen connects the ascent on Jacob’s Ladder with the third branch of the structure, which would correspond to Gregory’s third theophany. As a result of this analysis, one can see that Gregory’s pattern in \textit{The Life of Moses} does not follow the same order as Origen’s pattern, but is rather more complex.

One example of an attempt to harmonise Gregory’s pattern of light, cloud and darkness with other threefold patterns of the Fathers is by Michael Bakker in his article ‘Desire in Eastern Orthodox Praxis’.\textsuperscript{568} Brakke uses Louth’s observations as a basis of his chart, which connects Origen’s, Gregory’s, Evagrios’s, Pseudo-Denis’s and Maximus Confessor’s threefold models, making them look very similar in comparison. However, the harmonisation of these models is not that simple as Bakker tries to suggest. Bakker connects Gregory’s “light” with Origen’s \textit{ethike}, Evagrios’s \textit{praktike} and Denys’s purification, which are all set as the first step of the threefold model. However, Gregory connects his first step (light) with illumination which is Denys’s second step, whereas Gregory’s second (cloud) and third (darkness) steps have more references to intellectual purification. Gregory’s threefold pattern of light, cloud and darkness is therefore quite different in comparison with the other models of the Fathers. There is a certain originality in Gregory’s complex pattern that certainly requires more careful attention.

Gregory’s patterns have been compared by several scholars with Plato’s kataphatic model towards the Good in \textit{The Republic}.\textsuperscript{569} Gregory affirms God as absolute Good,\textsuperscript{570} which is a parallel with Plato. Plato’s description of

\textsuperscript{568} Michael Brakke, ‘Desire in Eastern Orthodox Praxis’, in Ganzevoort, Brouwer & Miller-McLemore (eds), \textit{City of Desires – A Place for God?}, Berlin 2013, 169.
\textsuperscript{569} “...the time has now arrived at which they must raise the eye of the soul to the universal light which lightens all things, and behold the absolute good; for that is the pattern (paradigmata) which they are to order the State and the lives of individuals, and the remainder of their own lives also; making philosophy their chief pursuit;” Plato, \textit{The Republic}, trans. J. Harward, 540A–B.
\textsuperscript{570} Gregory of Nyssa, \textit{The Life of Moses}, 1.7.
contemplation is an example of the traditional use of kataphatic light imagery. Anthony Meredith has noted that in Gregory’s sequence, the illumination of the burning bush precedes the need for moral purity, which makes the sequence different from Plato, who stresses the need for moral purification before mental growth.  

Philip Kariatlis, commenting Meredith’s observation, sees a danger in Plato’s pattern, which could “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.” As we can see here, even though there are similarities, there are also crucial differences between the patterns that must be noted.

I see in Gregory’s sequence a call for moral purification both before and after the burning bush, and in fact after all three theophanies, and therefore it is difficult to make these compatible with Plato’s pattern. In Gregory’s pattern, moral purification is an element that is always connected with the symbols of the lowlands, in other words, with Egypt and the wanderings of the desert. Ojell has rightly stressed that Gregory’s model is not all about ascending. The soul doesn’t always gradually rise higher and higher, but it also descends for more purification on the desert. In Gregory’s model, the soul may also return figuratively to Egypt, either due to a relapse in the battle against the passions, or to save other people from bondage of the passions. Ojell sees a prophetic element in connection with Moses’s descents: Moses never descends from the mountain empty handed, but always brings a divine message for the benefit of the Church. The prophecy is revealed on the mountain, and it is brought to people’s use down below. Ojell adds that God ordered Moses to “deliver ‘in material imitations’ down to the valley for all his people to participate”. Here Ojell refers to the various models that Moses received from God on the mountain: the divine commandments, the priestly vestments, and the various details of the holy tabernacle. Ojell presents a following model according to his observations of Gregory’s pattern towards virtue.

1. ascent - spiritual advance in virtue.
2. descent - practical side of virtue.
3. advancing Christ, who is virtue.

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574 ibid. 177.
Ojell’s observations bring an important element to the analysis: also Moses’s descents need to be included as meaningful details of Gregory’s overall pattern. Moses ascends into the realm of intellectual contemplation and mystical participation with God, and descends back to the wilderness for praxis, purification and to save others from bondage. Ojell also doesn’t forget the Christological focus of Gregory’s exegetical model, which is a mimetic model that sees Moses as a typos of Christ.

5. Conclusion
Finally we have come to the end of our inner journey through all the waypoints and landmarks of Gregory’s symbolic sequence of spiritual topography. And what a journey it has been! This thesis is the culmination of a process that started 3rd of November 2011, when I was introduced to Gregory’s spiritual topography under the guidance of Pauli Annala for the first time.

First of all, in this thesis I have provided an elaborate analysis of the origins and concepts of Gregory’s exegetical method. Gregory’s method of exegesis in The Life of Moses is twofold: in addition to the summary of a historical narrative (historia), Gregory provides another narrative (theoria), which gives a moral, metaphysical or spiritual meaning to each detail of the Exodus narrative. The details of the theoria are sometimes called symbols, sometimes enigmas (ainigma), metaphors (metaphora), allegories (hypnoia, allegoria), or types (typos). The concept of searching for a spiritual meaning of a certain detail or part in the narrative is defined as anagogy (anagoge), allegory (allegoria) or tropology (tropologia). Also an intriguing finding for me was Gregory’s use of Parmenidean concept of aletheia and doxa, which is about leaving behind erroneous opinions and preconceptions in order to reveal the truthful message of the narrative. The possible influence of Parmenides to Patristic authors is a question which needs to be investigated further. There is nothing new and original in the methods that Gregory is applying in his exegesis. However, there is something unique in Gregory’s way of dividing his treatise into two separate narratives, the literal/historical summary (historia) and the allegorical meta-narrative (theoria).

Secondly, I have provided an analysis of the symbolic meaning of each detail of Gregory’s topographical pattern based on the Exodus narrative. The influence of Philo on Gregory’s topographical imagery is imminent, as well as the
influence of Origen and Paul. Some scholars have compared Gregory’s exegesis with the exegesis of Clement of Alexandria. However, I haven’t found enough evidence that Gregory would have been influenced by Clement or that he would have been familiar with Clement’s original writings.

Thirdly, I have given an analysis of Gregory’s symbolic topographical pattern as a whole. In Gregory’s inner geography, the symbolic details, which are based on the sequence of the topographical locations of the journey of Moses and the Israelites, form a new meta-narrative. The new narrative then becomes an outline of a spiritual path that a devout Christian follows. In this way, the original narrative, in this case the Exodus narrative, does not remain as a mere historical narrative of ancient times but it becomes relevant to the reader. The main purpose of Gregory’s treatise was to show the events of Moses’s life as a pattern that an ideal bishop follows. The pattern was then used for the education of catechumens and priests.

I have identified several patterns in Gregory’s The Life of Moses, which are intertwined in a complex manner, and are often times difficult to distinguish from one another. The first most obvious pattern is the horizontal pattern, which focuses on the journey of the Israelites toward the promised land through the lowlands: Egypt, The Nile, the desert and the Red Sea. This pattern concentrates on the right moral conduct and proper education. After being freed from total inclination to the passions and lack of self-control, (symbolised by the exodus from Egypt) the soul then goes through moral purification (the desert), which for Gregory means freeing oneself from the bondage of the passions. The final aim of moral purification is apatheia, complete freedom from emotions (symbolised by the foot of the mountain), which is originally a Stoic concept. Gregory’s images of the Egyptian city life and the desert are strongly rooted in Origen’s exegesis.

The vertical or anagogical pattern, which has a theophanic emphasis, focuses on Moses and his ascents on the mountain. The aim (telos) of the vertical pattern is infinite and endless; It aims at an ever-higher participation with God through intellectual purification. It is a path that, according to Gregory, only a minority of people are able to enter. Most people either remain in Egypt (which symbolises life bound to ignorance, passions and materialism), or remain in the desert (moral purification) practicing metriopatheia. Gregory connects various terrains of the lowlands to the moral and ascetical praxis, and the terrain of the mountain to his philosophical and mystical concepts in a fairly consistent manner.
throughout the treatise. Gregory’s pattern does not depict a continuous growth from total ignorance to perfection, but the pattern has ascents and descents. A spiritual path is not for Gregory ever-expanding bliss; the soul often goes through trials and relapses, ups and downs, and is unable to reach its ultimate goal of perfection. Even though perfection is unattainable, one must not cease from pursuing virtuous qualities. The process of personal growth continues throughout the whole lifetime. The perpetual spiritual progress toward the infinite God, epektasis, is one of the main motifs of Gregory’s theology, which has Pauline background. The realization of epektasis is connected with the third theophany of Gregory’s topographical pattern.

Already a known fact is the influence of Plato’s concept of purification and spiritual ascent on Gregory’s exegesis. It seems that Gregory’s use of the ladder as a symbol of spiritual ascent is based on Plato’s allegory. Plato doesn’t provide a topographical model for his spiritual ascent, but he seems to have influenced the development of Gregory’s ocean imagery.

A challenging task was to assess the influence of Neoplatonic allegorical exegesis and spiritual ascent on Gregory’s thought, since Gregory does not mention any neoplatonists by name. Nevertheless, there is some similarity between Neoplatonic anagogical interpretation and Gregory’s topographical exegesis that needs further investigation.

Also distinguishable in Gregory’s exegesis is the mimetic concept of holding the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and church leaders as examples of virtue. The virtuous lives of these honourable individuals then become patterns that are imitated by devout Christians. The main mimetic pattern presented in The Life of Moses is the christological pattern, which treats Moses as a typos of Christ and connects the details of the Exodus narrative with the events of the Gospels. Also the classical Greek artistic mimesis had a great impact on Gregory, which makes Gregory’s mimetic concept more Aristotelian than Platonic.

The influence of Stoic and Aristotelian philosophy on Gregory is imminent especially in his concept of akolouthia, which is the key concept of analysing the coherence of topographical details and their interpretations in Gregory’s exegesis. According to Gregory, the details of the theoria are meant to form a logical sequence, in which each detail must follow one another in an inevitable manner, as if they were rungs on a ladder. I have come to the conclusion that the concept of akolouthia seems to be not only a crucial element in Gregory’s thought, but a
key concept for the whole Patristic Era that is known and applied by several
exegetes. The next objective would be to make comparisons by investigating the
subtle differences of how the exegetes, Alexandrian or Antiochene, are applying
*akolouthia*.

Gregory’s tendency to construct patterns as an outline of an inner journey of
a soul makes him more indebted to Origen than Philo. There are, however, crucial
differences between Origen’s and Gregory’s patterns. Origen’s pattern emphasises
the kataphatic way, while Gregory’s pattern has both apophatic and kataphatic
elements.

According to Belden C. Lane, the tradition of Alexandrian and Cappadocian
topographical symbolism was transmitted through Euagrios, Pseudo-Dionysius
and John Scotus Eriugena to the medieval thinkers John of the Cross, Thomas
Gallus and Meister Eckhart.575 The following task then would be to make a more
elaborate analysis of the possible influence of Gregory’s topographical symbolism
on the theology of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

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The conventions I have observed in the text, the footnotes and the bibliography
are based on the instructions of *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, last updated 25th
of October, 2010.

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Clement of Alexandria


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Diodore of Tarsus


Eusebius of Caesarea


Gregory of Nyssa


Hesiod

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Parmenides of Elea

Philo of Alexandria

Plato


Plutarch


Porphyry


Sextus Empiricus


Tatian


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### Tables

**The Structure of Gregory of Nyssa’s *The Life of Moses* Based on the Topography of the Book of Exodus**

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