

THE METAPHOR OF MOSES' ASCENT OF SINAI WITHIN PATRISTIC TRADITION

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Abstract

The paper explores the exegesis of Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai in Apostle Paul, Saint Clement of Alexandria, Origen, the Cappadocian Fathers, Saint Macarius of Egypt, Saint Theodoret of Syrus, Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Cyril of Alexandria, Saint John of the Ladder, Saint Maximus the Confessor, Saint John of Damascus, Saint Gregory of Palamas. The reason for the interest in this particular subject is that in many theological works of the twentieth century, the image of Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai is conceived as a paradigm of human ascent towards the union with the divine, i.e. the person's deification, and is depicted as a comprehensive pattern of Christian spirituality. This paper explores firstly whether this pattern exists in the works of the Fathers (focusing on the major thinkers of the first centuries), and secondly it aims to trace the circumstances that triggered the development of this paradigm. I was not able to trace back any evidence of the perception of the ascent of Sinai as a paradigm of the human spiritual path in the Fathers, at least not earlier than the fourteenth century. Even at that time, it seems to be the result of an unintentional overlap of two concepts. The first is Palamas' claim that Moses' ascent of Sinai prefigured the glory anticipated for the saints after the Resurrection. The second is the concept of theosis, the telos of which was perceived as the reception of this glory. When these two concepts overlapped, Moses' ascent of Sinai started to be perceived as a metaphor for theosis, understood as a gradual spiritualisation of the soul, in which its union with the Divine was reserved for the end. In the earlier Fathers, the pattern of human spiritual growth is always outlined as Exodus out of Egypt and movement towards the Promised Land. Sinai symbolically represents one of the stages of the spiritual development of a human. Mount Sinai serves as a metaphor for Theology or for the Incarnation of Christ.

Keywords: Ascent of Sinai, Mount Sinai, Moses, Apostle Paul, Saint Clement of Alexandria, Origen, the Cappadocian Fathers, Saint Macarius of Egypt, Saint Theodoret of Syrus, Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Cyril of Alexandria, Saint John of the Ladder, Saint Maximus the Confessor, Saint John of Damascus, Saint Gregory of Palamas, theosis, Exodus out of Egypt, union with the Divine, metaphor of the mountain