

MOSES' LUMINOUS TRANSFORMATION IN THE DARKNESS OF UNKNOWING: THE JOURNEY OF A BIBLICAL MOTIF

Dr Ann Conway-Jones

Department of Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham, UK

<https://doi.org/10.47433/tv.xcviin1-4.39>

Abstract

When Moses descends Mount Sinai for the final time, something has happened to the skin of his face (Ex 34:29). The Septuagint describes him as being charged with glory (δεδόξασται). This paper starts by exploring the antecedents for Moses' transformation in ancient Mesopotamian mythological imagery. It then traces interpretations of Exodus 34:28-35 through literature written in Greek, from Second Temple Jewish writings and the New Testament to early Christian mystical theologians, focussing on Gregory of Nyssa, The Macarian Homilies, and Pseudo-Dionysius. It makes a case for understanding these theologians not only in terms of their philosophical commitments, but also through their engagement with scripture, and their exegetical choices.

Keywords: Mystical Theology, Biblical Interpretation, Moses, New Testament, Gregory of Nyssa, The Macarian Homilies, Pseudo-Dionysius.

Introduction

The sixth century Syrian theologian who wrote under the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite (see Acts 17:34) opens his treatise *Mystical Theology* by praying:

O Trinity [...] guide us to the highest summit – utterly unknowable and transcendently radiant – of the mystical Scriptures, where the simple, absolute, immutable mysteries of theology are veiled by the brilliant darkness of hidden silence¹.

And the section of the “mystical Scriptures” to which he turns to model this apophatic exegetical journey is the Exodus account of Moses' experiences on Mount Sinai. He converts a complicated narrative, full of discontinuities and discrepancies,

¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, MT 1.1 (PTS 36.142); my translation.