NOT MADE WITH HANDS

GREGORY OF NYSSA’S DOCTRINE OF THE CELESTIAL TABERNACLE IN
ITS JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN CONTEXTS

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The aim of this thesis is to explore Gregory of Nyssa’s tabernacle imagery, as presented in *Life of Moses* 2.170-201. This part of *Life of Moses* has suffered from relative neglect compared to the scholarly attention conferred on Gregory’s apophatic darkness imagery. For the purposes of this study, *Life of Moses* 2.162-201 has been divided into nine consecutive sections, given the following headings: Darkness; The tabernacle ‘not made with hands’; Christological interpretation; Divine names; Heavenly powers; The earthly tabernacle; Heavenly and earthly worship; The holy of holies; The priestly vestments. Each section is analysed in the same way. Firstly, Gregory’s text is examined, and his biblical sources identified. Secondly, there is a presentation of relevant passages in the work of his Alexandrian predecessors – Philo, Clement and Origen. Thirdly, there is a discussion of the ways in which Gregory’s fourth century theological context has influenced his interpretation, often causing him to differ from his predecessors. It is under this heading of ‘theological context’ that contemporary scholarly discussions about Gregory are most in evidence. Fourthly, a heuristic comparison with a range of heavenly ascent texts from the Hellenistic and Late Antique worlds is undertaken. It is this methodology of heuristic comparison which is the experimental aspect of the thesis. The aim is not to prove influence, but to use heavenly ascent texts as a foil, in order to shed new light on Gregory’s imagery. Does Gregory’s interpretation of the tabernacle come into focus when viewed through the lens of heavenly ascent? In order to answer this question, the scholarship on heavenly ascent texts is mined for new ways of looking at *Life of Moses*.

The conclusions begin by reviewing the methodology. It is argued that although many of the themes explored stem from the biblical text, and occur in Gregory’s Alexandrian predecessors, the richness of possibilities they provide, and therefore the choices made by Gregory, only become apparent when his work is compared and contrasted with a wide range of other heavenly ascent texts. Even in the case of a fourth century Christian work heavily influenced by Platonism, attending to the Jewish matrix of Christian mysticism pays dividends. The conclusions continue by listing the key ideas discovered in *Life of Moses* 2.170-201. They end by discussing the relationships between mysticism, theology and politics in Gregory’s tabernacle imagery. It is argued that Gregory holds all three together. This is typical of heavenly ascent texts, which combine descriptions of religious experience with claims to authoritative knowledge. For Gregory, the high point of Moses’ ascent into the darkness of Mount Sinai is the mystery of Christian doctrine. The heavenly tabernacle is a type of the heavenly Christ. This mystery is beyond intellectual comprehension, it can only be grasped by faith; and only the select few, destined for positions of responsibility, should even attempt to do so. But its benefits are available to all through the community’s worship in the earthly tabernacle. Anyone can aspire to wear an airy, angelic robe by living a life of virtue, in which faith and practice go hand in hand.
DECLARATION

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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DEDICATION

To my grandmothers:

Elsie Conway

and

Olive Daniel.

Elsie Conway was awarded a PhD in botany in 1925. During the Second World War she researched the potential of British seaweeds to provide agar-like compounds, as supplies from the Far East were becoming restricted. She was a founder member of the British Phycological Society.

Olive Daniel sailed to the Caribbean, on her own, in 1930, to marry a man she hadn’t seen for 3 years. When once again separated by the Atlantic during the Second World War, they evaded the censor using a code based on the hymn numbers in the Methodist Hymn Book.

For their examples of scholarship and faith, and for their cherishing of me, I am profoundly grateful.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many and varied are the people who have supported and encouraged me during the six years it has taken to complete this thesis. I would like to thank my dialogue partners in Birmingham – Birmingham Progressive Synagogue, Mosaic (the Birmingham Society for Jewish Studies), the Birmingham Council of Christians and Jews, and the Annual Birmingham Jewish-Christian Study Day – for kindling and sustaining my interest in the complex interactions between Judaism and Christianity, Jews and Christians. The Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations in Cambridge gave me the confidence to undertake serious study again, and to convert interest into sustained research. Studying Midrash and Talmud with Margaret Jacobi has been a privilege. Interaction with the students on my Introduction to Biblical Hebrew module at Birmingham University has been stimulating and enjoyable. I am grateful to my colleagues at Birmingham University, particularly Philip Burton, Hugh Houghton, Charlotte Hempel and Deryn Guest, for their support. John Hall has taken an enthusiastic interest in this project from the start. Our meetings in the reception hall of Thimblemill Swimming Baths to translate Life of Moses must have amused the staff. Life has not been altogether straightforward during these six years, and John Austen has helped me to navigate some rather choppy waters. My friends Maggy, Marlene and Mary have provided bolt-holes when I needed them. I was made welcome at two International Colloquia on Gregory of Nyssa, in Tübingen and Leuven, which provided invaluable insights into Gregory’s theology. My trips to Manchester have always been a pleasure. The Ehrhardt seminars supplied scholarly input and debate. I am grateful to Kate Cooper and Todd Klutz for acting as my second supervisors; and I would like to thank my fellow students Maria, Penny, Katharina, David and Sandra for their friendship. The staff at the John Rylands University Library Document Supply Service have been fantastic – never complaining about the difficulties I created by living in Birmingham but studying in Manchester. Staff in the postgraduate office of the School of Arts, Histories and Cultures, notably Anna Bigland and Joanne Marsh, ensured that all went well with funding applications. Above all, my thanks go to my supervisor, Philip Alexander, for his wisdom and generosity. Conversations with him were a delight and an inspiration: I was sent home reinvigorated.
My research was funded by a Postgraduate Award from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, for which I am most grateful. A University of Manchester School of Arts, Histories and Cultures Postgraduate Research Travel Grant enabled me to go to the International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa in Tübingen. The AHRC paid my travel costs for the Leuven Colloquium.

Research towards this thesis appears in the following publications:


And finally, I am indebted to Michael, Ben and Simeon. Our family life has supplied the background love sustaining all my endeavours.
ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations follow *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies* (Alexander et al. 1999). As suggested there (page 238), Greek and Latin works are referred to by English titles in the text, but Latin abbreviations are used in parenthetical notes. Abbreviations for Gregory of Nyssa’s works are taken from *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa* (Mateo-Seco & Maspero 2010), with additional full stops.
THE AUTHOR OF THE THESIS

Ann Conway-Jones was born in Geneva, Switzerland, to British parents. As a child, she was bilingual in English and French. She spent her teenage years in London, and then studied Natural Sciences at Cambridge University. Following three years of voluntary work, in Handsworth and France, she went to The Queen’s College, Birmingham, to train as an Accredited Lay Worker for the Church of England. As part of her training, she studied for a BLitt in theology at Birmingham University, where she learnt Greek. She wrote a dissertation on “The Cappadocian Sister: St Macrina, as portrayed by her brother, Gregory of Nyssa”. That was when she first read Life of Moses, noticed the paragraphs on the tabernacle not made with hands, and wondered about their significance. Whilst working in a parish in Smethwick, she taught herself Hebrew. After the birth of her children, she was employed as a part-time chaplain at Birmingham University, and studied for an MA in Jewish-Christian relations by distance learning, from the Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations in Cambridge. As a complement to her studies, she became secretary of the Birmingham branch of the Council of Christians and Jews. Later she was invited to become chair, a position she still holds. In her work for the MA, she focussed on early Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation, and learnt some Aramaic. On completing the MA, she became a part-time visiting lecturer at Birmingham University, teaching the ‘Introduction to Biblical Hebrew’ module. She entered into correspondence with Philip Alexander about enrolling at Manchester University as a PhD student. He sent her some of his work, comparing Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice with The Celestial Hierarchy of Dionysius the Areopagite. That is when she remembered Gregory’s description of the tabernacle not made with hands, and suggested that it might provide a suitable topic for research. This thesis is the result.
1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Aims of the thesis

The aim of this thesis is to explore Gregory of Nyssa’s tabernacle imagery, as presented in *Life of Moses* 2.170-201. Gregory of Nyssa is probably best known for his depiction of apophatic darkness. As Louth writes,

For Gregory of Nyssa the doctrine of God’s unknowability means that the soul’s ascent to God is an ascent into the divine darkness. ... Gregory depicts vividly the bewilderment, despair and longing that possesses the soul that seeks God. In the dark we can form no finished conception of what is there: this experience is interpreted by Gregory in terms of an endless longing for God, continually satisfied yet always yearning for more, which the soul knows that embarks on the search for the unknowable God. (1986, 167)

In *Life of Moses*, Gregory describes Moses entering into the darkness of Mount Sinai, where he sees God. This Gregory interprets as “the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness” (2.163). He evokes the same theme in *On the Song of Songs*:

As (the soul) leaves below all that human nature can attain, she enters within the secret chamber of the divine knowledge, and here she is cut off on all sides by the divine darkness. Now she leaves outside all that can be grasped by sense or by reason, and the only thing left for her contemplation is the invisible and the incomprehensible. And here God is, as the Scriptures tell us in connection with Moses: *But Moses went to the dark cloud wherein God was.* (Cant. 11; GNO 6.323.2-9; Musurillo 2001, 247)

However, within the darkness on Mount Sinai, Moses is shown a model of the tabernacle which the Israelites are to build (Ex 25:8-9). In *Life of Moses*, Gregory follows the Exodus account: Moses enters the darkness and there he sees the tabernacle not made with hands (ἡ ἄχειροποίητος σκηνή). Whereas Gregory’s interpretation of the darkness takes up three paragraphs of Daniélou’s edition (2.162-4), his commentary on the tabernacle, including the priestly vestments, occupies thirty-two paragraphs (2.170-201). Yet commentators feel able to present an outline of the *Life of Moses* with little or no mention of it. The aim of this thesis is to focus on this neglected part of *Life of Moses*, and draw attention to its significance.

The tabernacle was taken seriously by ancient writers. Exodus devotes 10 chapters (25-28, 35-40) to Moses’ vision of the model and the subsequent construction of the tabernacle. Detailed interpretations can be found in the works of Philo, Clement and Origen. Josephus, Methodius, Jerome and Theodoret also wrote about the tabernacle.
Moving forward in time, Bede produced a treatise with a verse-by-verse allegorical rendering of Exodus 24:12-30:21. And “perhaps the most learned and detailed treatises in the history of exegesis were called forth in the post-Reformation period in an effort to demonstrate the typology between the kingdom of God in the tabernacle and the church of Christ in its various forms as the invisible and visible, triumphant and militant, congregation of grace” (Childs 1974, 548). Typology is still taken seriously in Evangelical Christian circles, as demonstrated by websites which proclaim the tabernacle to be a prophetic projection of God’s redemptive plan.¹ Among liberal, academic readers, however, the tabernacle carries little resonance. As Childs writes,

Most modern readers of the book of Exodus have difficulty understanding why the biblical description of the tabernacle has been regarded from the beginning with the greatest possible interest by Jewish and Christian scholars alike. (1974, 547)

It does not feature in the Revised Common Lectionary, the pattern of Sunday readings used by a wide range of Christian denominations.² The probable reason, therefore, that the tabernacle has been sidelined in studies of Life of Moses is that, unlike darkness, it does not appeal to contemporary sensibilities. The tabernacle was, after all, the place of animal sacrifice, a practice most people now find repellent. However, despite the cessation of Jewish animal sacrifice in 70 C.E., tabernacle/temple theology lived on. Christians transferred temple imagery to the church, and sacrificial imagery to the Eucharist.

Even before the destruction of the earthly temple, there was speculation about its heavenly counterpart. From the Book of the Watchers onwards, temple structures were mapped onto the heavenly realms. It was widely assumed that the ‘pattern’ seen by Moses was the heavenly tabernacle – God’s dwelling place. And privileged individuals, such as Enoch, Levi and Isaiah, were assumed to have gained access to that divine seat of power. It features in the New Testament: Hebrews depicts Christ as the high priest of “the greater and more perfect tabernacle (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation)” (9:11); and Revelation, drawing on Ezekiel’s vision of the divine chariot, describes the heavenly throne, the celestial equivalent of the ark of the covenant. There is a rich tradition of heavenly ascent texts, running from Second Temple apocalyptic to the Hekhalot literature of Late Antiquity, in which an individual, or possibly a

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¹ See, for example, www.the-tabernacle-place.com, www.tabernacleofmoses.org, or www.tabernacleofmoses.net.

² The exception which proves the rule is that extracts from the description of the priestly vestments (Ex 28:1-4, 9-10, 29-30) may be used as an alternative reading for the seventh Sunday of Easter (year B) in the Church of Ireland and the Church in Wales.
community (thinking of *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*), ascends to heaven and glimpses the divine throne with its myriad attendant angels. Some of these texts are Jewish, some Christian, some a mixture (such as a Jewish text reworked by Christian editors) and for some more nuanced definitions of identity are required. Gregory’s description of Moses’ ascent into the darkness of Mount Sinai in order to see the tabernacle not made with hands fits into this paradigm. Can the heavenly ascent texts therefore throw light on Gregory’s work? Some, such as *1 Enoch* or *Ascension of Isaiah*, he may have known, others, such as *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* or the Hekhalot literature, he cannot possibly have been aware of. The aim of this thesis is not to prove that Gregory was influenced by particular heavenly ascent texts, but to use comparison and contrast heuristically, so as to enhance the understanding of Gregory’s ideas and use of imagery. Does Gregory’s interpretation of the tabernacle come into focus when viewed through the lens of heavenly ascent?

McGinn writes,

I am convinced that to neglect the Jewish roots of Christian mysticism and to see it, as many have done, as a purely Greek phenomenon is to risk misconstruing an important part of its history. (1991, 22)

He presents the Jewish apocalypses, alongside the philosophical-religious tradition begun by Plato, as “major components of the background of Christian mysticism” (1991, 5).

Alexander agrees, and wants to add evidence from Qumran to the exploration of the Jewish matrix of Christian mysticism:

The key ideas of Qumran mysticism – the celestial temple, the angelic liturgies, communion with the angels through liturgy and the ultimate angelification of the mystic – all had a vigorous afterlife specifically within Christian tradition. (2006a, 138)

This thesis looks even further afield, and includes Jewish texts from Late Antiquity, in order to provide a rich variety of material with which to compare and contrast the tabernacle passage in *Life of Moses*. Gregory’s relationship with Platonism has been thoroughly explored. Looking at his work from the angle of heavenly ascent traditions may produce new insights.

The primary questions motivating this thesis are: What is the significance of Gregory’s tabernacle interpretation in *Life of Moses* 2.169-201? Why was it important to him? What was he trying to convey? How did he envisage the relationship between the

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3 For an introduction to heavenly ascent texts, see Himmelfarb (1993a).
4 See Frankfurter (2007).
heavenly and earthly tabernacles, in other words, between the divine and the human? Answering these questions, and taking seriously not only ‘darkness’ but also the vision revealed within it, may revise the understanding of Life of Moses, and of Gregory’s mysticism more generally. In undertaking a heuristic comparison with heavenly ascent texts, a secondary question emerges: How fruitful is it, even in the case of a fourth century work clearly influenced by Platonic traditions, to take seriously the Jewish matrix of Christian mysticism? Recent scholarship has re-examined the boundaries between Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity, questioning whether a final parting of the ways ever happened. If this study does prove fruitful, it will provide yet another example of the value of studying Jewish and Christian texts alongside each other.

1.2 Research methodology

The ‘meat’ of this thesis is chapter 4: a close reading of Life of Moses 2.162-201. The text has been divided into nine consecutive sections. Each section is analysed in the same way. Firstly, Gregory’s text is examined, and his biblical sources identified. The most important biblical passages from which Gregory draws are introduced in 3.1. Secondly, there is a presentation of relevant passages in the work of his Alexandrian predecessors – Philo, Clement and Origen. The Alexandrian texts which interpret the tabernacle are introduced in 3.2. Thirdly, there is a discussion of the ways in which Gregory’s fourth century theological context has influenced his interpretation, often causing him to differ from his predecessors. The key theological ideas and disputes necessary for understanding Life of Moses are introduced in 3.3. It is under this heading of ‘theological context’ that contemporary scholarly discussions about Gregory are most in evidence. Fourthly, a heuristic comparison with a number of heavenly ascent texts is undertaken. The texts used are introduced in 3.4.

There is a clear difference between the first three parts of each section of chapter 4 and the last one. In the first three Gregory’s sources and influences are identified, whether biblical texts, previous interpretations of the tabernacle, particularly in the Alexandrian tradition, or fourth century debates and disagreements. Here we are on fairly sure ground. Part four, which uses heavenly ascent texts as a foil, is experimental. Gregory’s work is compared and contrasted with other traditions about the heavenly tabernacle/temple in order to shed new light on his imagery; and the scholarship on these

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5 Life of Moses 2.182 and 2.185 are examined together, out of sequence, in a section entitled ‘Heavenly and earthly worship’ (4.8). There is also a preliminary section (4.1) on ‘Heavenly ascents’.
texts is mined for new questions to be asked of Life of Moses. Sandmel defines ‘parallelomania’ as “that extravagance among scholars which first overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and derivation as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction” (1962, 1). Here, by contrast, differences are as important as similarities, and no literary connection is implied. In principle, such a heuristic comparison could have been undertaken with traditions from any time or place. However, these heavenly ascent texts were produced and/or read in the Late Antique Eastern Mediterranean. They do come from Gregory’s time and place, very broadly understood. And like Gregory, they take inspiration from the biblical text. Recent scholarship has suggested that the boundaries between Judaism and Christianity, up to and including the fourth century, were less fixed and more permeable than previously thought. Ideas travelled across them in all sorts of ways, from casual meetings in the market place, to attendance at each other’s festivals, to the scholarly reading of texts. Much of the imagery in apocalyptic literature is graphic and memorable; it doesn’t need to be embedded in a text to be passed on. Therefore it is not impossible that Gregory was influenced by, and perhaps reacted against, the kind of ideas contained in heavenly ascent texts. By undertaking a heuristic comparison influence is not being ruled out. But proving influence is not the aim. The aim in this thesis is to sharpen the understanding of Gregory’s use of tabernacle imagery.

Segal states, “Christianity, the mystery cults, Emperor cult, magic, theosophy, late classical philosophy, and even rabbinic Judaism, to a lesser extent, were committed to the ascension pattern, tailored to their own needs” (1980, 1388). The net for this heuristic comparison could therefore have been cast even wider. There are significant traditions which are not represented. One is the Syriac tradition, a route by which ideas and imagery from near-Eastern traditions could have reached Gregory. There is mention of Messalian tendencies in 4.7, on the earthly tabernacle, and of fourth century Neo-Platonism in 4.5, on divine names, but no systematic comparison with either. Valentinian ideas are included in some of the discussions of Gregory’s Alexandrian predecessors, but no other so-called Gnostic texts are considered. Even the comparison with heavenly ascent texts is not exhaustive. A selection of texts has been made, based on their usefulness for this study.

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6 See, for example, Becker & Reed (2007); or Boyarin (2004a).
Given that it is experimental, this methodology of heuristic comparison will be reviewed in the concluding chapter, with the following questions in mind: Has Gregory’s use of tabernacle imagery come into sharper focus as a result of the comparison? Which heavenly ascent texts have been particularly useful? Have any of the concepts developed by scholars of Jewish mysticism proved of value in examining Gregory’s text?

1.3 Relationship to previous scholarship and current research

Gregory’s tabernacle imagery has received nothing like the scholarly attention conferred on his apophatic darkness imagery. This sidelining is illustrated by Ferguson (1976), Meredith (1999, 99-109), and Harrison (1992b, 73-85), who summarise *Life of Moses* without mentioning the tabernacle. Harrison quotes *Life of Moses* 2.163, which includes the phrase ‘the seeing that consists in not seeing’, and asks, “What then is seen?” (1992b, 76). She answers her question with an extract from *On the Song of Songs* which refers to “some sense of His presence”, even though in *Life of Moses* it is clearly the heavenly tabernacle that is seen. Macleod is an exception to the general neglect, pointing out that “the reverse side of Gregory’s negative theology is Christian faith: in the very darkness which surrounds God we see the ‘tabernacle’, Christ” (1971, 378); but he doesn’t explore this in any detail. Thanks to another text from *On the Song of Songs*, Daniélou divides Gregory’s mysticism into three stages: light, cloud and darkness (1954, 18-9). Heine points out that the details of *Life of Moses* do not follow this scheme:

(Daniélou) pictures the soul as moving from gnosia in the second stage, to mystic contemplation of God in darkness in the third stage. It is after Moses has gone into the darkness, however, that he has the vision of the tabernacle which, Daniélou acknowledges, is presented in terms of gnosia. He, therefore, puts the vision of the tabernacle in the second stage in the structure of his book. Gregory, however, presents the vision of the tabernacle as a step beyond Moses’ entering “the invisible sanctuary of the knowledge of God”. (1975, 3 n.2)

Daniélou provides a detailed commentary on Gregory’s tabernacle imagery (1954, 162-72), focussing on the way in which Gregory replaces the Platonic *kosmos noētos* with the angelic world. Heine homes in on the “repeated emphasis on the leadership of the church throughout the treatise” (1975, 23), pointing out Gregory’s use of the earthly tabernacle to highlight church leaders, and of the priestly vestments to teach about priestly virtue (1975, 24). Lieb includes *Life of Moses* in his survey of traditions stemming from Ezekiel’s *visio Dei*. He sees Gregory’s depiction of Moses’ experience as culminating with the ark of the covenant:
Having ascended the mountain of knowledge, the seer penetrates the luminous darkness of the tabernacle to find himself before the ark of the covenant upon which reside those cherubim whose significance is to be seen in the respective visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel. Within the tabernacle Gregory’s seer beholds his own version of the merkabah. (1991, 225-6)

This distorts Gregory’s narrative, which cannot really be said to climax at that point, but it does provide a precedent for examining Life of Moses against the background of traditions of heavenly ascent inspired by Ezekiel’s vision. Lieb is right that the texts relating the visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel “represent a locus classicus in Gregory for the kind of visionary enactment that expressed what Moses was made to undergo in his ascent of the mount” (1991, 226).

As well as the previous scholarship on Gregory’s interpretation of the tabernacle, just outlined, this thesis draws on a number of areas of current research, four of which will now be introduced.

1.3.1 **Rethinking Gregory of Nyssa**

A collection of essays, edited by Coakley, entitled *Rethinking Gregory of Nyssa*, was published in 2003. In her introduction, Coakley notes “the myriad differences of style and genre with which Gregory plays in his various works, and his often infuriatingly inconsistent modes of argument” (2003, 11). She calls for an integrated approach to his work, in which false disjunctions, such as ‘theology’/’spirituality’ or ‘philosophy’/’exegesis’, are laid aside (2003, 2). In particular, she argues for “the significance of Gregory’s wider exegetical corpus for the assessment and understanding of his doctrinal contribution” (2003, 5). Another contributor to that volume is Laird, who draws attention to Gregory’s designation of the holy of holies as “the apophatic space of the inner sanctuary, the hidden chamber of the heart” (2003, 85). In his own book, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge and Divine Presence*, he emphasises the exegetical character of Gregory’s work, insisting that the theme of divine darkness is not introduced “apart from scriptural texts which lend themselves to such an interpretation” (2004, 180). In the context of other scriptural lemmata Gregory is equally capable of presenting a mysticism of light (2004, 174). This thesis continues the trend of re-examining Gregory’s exegesis, and allowing it to inform more nuanced and complex understandings of his doctrinal positions. It also seeks to break down the divide between his propositional statements and his poetic use of imagery.
In *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)modern*, Ludlow examines the ways in which Gregory has been read by twentieth and twenty-first century theologians. She insists that she is not rejecting the techniques of traditional patristic scholarship: “The methods of traditional patristic scholarship (historical and philological) can be used to advise on the limits or scope of meaning; the use of other recent readings can be used continually to stretch the limits of what patristic scholars consider possible” (2007b, 290). This thesis is stretching the limits in a different direction, by a comparison with Jewish texts, but it too stays in dialogue with patristic scholarship. Ludlow characterises Gregory's theological method as one of “keeping questions in play, or forcing readers continually to reassess their answers”, a method which arises out of “the fruitful ambiguity of Scripture” (2007b, 288-9). This is why “there are still some surprises to be found in his texts” (2007b, 290). One of the theologians analysed by Ludlow is Douglass, who develops the concept of a ‘metadiastemic intrusion’, which will be examined in 4.4.3. Although he approaches Gregory from the perspective of post-Heideggerian philosophy, he relies on biblical traditions of “impenetrable, circumscribed spaces within which dwelt the inaccessible presence of God”, notably the holy of holies (2005, 133). It is gratifying that this postmodern reading of Gregory underlines the significance of tabernacle imagery.

1.3.2 Debates around mysticism

There has been a fault line in Gregorian scholarship between those who label *Life of Moses* and *On the Song of Songs* as ‘mystical’, and those who categorise them as ‘theological’. Harrison (1992b, 62) places Daniélou, Völker and Lieske among the former, and Langerbeck, Mühlenberg, Heine and Barmann among the latter. Those on the ‘mystical’ side are happy to talk in terms of “union with God” (Daniélou 2001, 31, 33; Laird 2000, 77), “a sense of presence” (Canévet 1972; Daniélou 2001, 32; Laird 2004, 199), or “participation in the divine life” (Harrison 1992b, 79). Mühlenberg, on the other hand, states,


And Heine argues that “the polemical theology of Gregory’s debate with Origenism and Eunomianism provides the base from which the *De vita Moysis* can be properly interpreted” (1975, 5). Similar debates have taken place over heavenly ascent texts, often couched in terms of ‘exegesis’ versus ‘experience’. Stone and Himmelfarb have had a long-running disagreement over whether the pseudepigraphic ascent apocalypses are “literary documents” (Himmelfarb 1993a, 98; cf. 1995, 132) or reflections of “actual
visionary activity or analogous religious experience” (Stone 2003b, 167; cf. 1991, 428). Halperin (1980, 179) and Schäfer (2009, 211) insist that the accounts of ma’aseh merkavah (the work of the chariot) in rabbinic literature are referring to the exegetical activity of interpreting the first chapter of Ezekiel, whereas Wolfson (1994b, 121-4) and Morray-Jones (Rowland & Morray-Jones 2009, 258-9) object to the sharp distinction between exegetical activity and visionary mysticism. Alexander points out that “there is constant ebb and flow between text and experience” (2006a, 60). Experience suggests exegetical moves, exegesis provides the language and images with which to express experience. However, whereas the exegetical moves behind a text can be deciphered; decoding the experience involved is another matter. “L’historien ne sait que ce qu’on lui dit. Il ne pénètre pas le secret des cœurs” (Festugière 1954, 267; quoted Macleod 1971, 362). This thesis is about literary texts, not the phenomenology of mysticism. It is not therefore seeking to discover what experience lies behind the texts. Instead, it examines their language, asking what it seeks to convey about the human relationship to the divine. In particular, it inquires how Gregory’s tabernacle imagery, looked at through the lens of heavenly ascent, fits with notions of ‘union’, ‘presence’ or ‘participation’.
1.3.3 Reassessment of Jewish/Christian boundaries

*The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Becker & Reed 2007) includes an article by Goodman in which he presents a series of diagrams illustrating the changes that have occurred in scholarly understandings of Jewish-Christian relations. He starts with a standard view of 'the parting of the ways' (2007a, 121).⁷

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⁷ These diagrams are reproduced by kind permission of Martin Goodman and Mohr Siebeck.
In conversation, Goodman has said that this diagram is too simplistic – it ought really to be three dimensional! A prominent advocate of the re-evaluation of Jewish-Christian boundaries is Boyarin. He has questioned the use of the terms ‘Judaism’ and ‘Christianity’, arguing that “there is no nontheological or nonanachronistic way at all to
distinguish Christianity from Judaism until institutions are in place that make and enforce this distinction, and even then, we know precious little about what the nonelite and nonchattering classes were thinking or doing”. He tries “to show that there is at least some reason to think that, in fact, vast numbers of people around the empire made no such firm distinctions at all until fairly late in the story” (2009, 28). Our encounter with Jewish and Christian traditions is, for the most part, through literary texts, and the new thinking recognises that “what the texts were doing is sometimes as, if not more, important than what they were saying” (Lieu 2002, 3). Heresiological literature, in particular, is not a reflection of reality, but an attempt to reconfigure reality. Williams describes how its redefinition of the content of orthodoxy typically took place in two stages:

First, what was once comfortably within the parameters of the acceptable is designated “‘heretical’”, so that it can be expelled from “‘orthodoxy.’” These rejected elements are then further identified with some category that can safely be assumed to have always already been outside the bounds of orthodoxy. For Christians, of course, that category was “‘Judaism.’” (2009, 48)

The fourth century is now seen “as the critical era for Jewish and Christian self-definition” (Becker & Reed 2007, 17; cf. Boyarin 1999, 18; Alexander 1992). Only then did church fathers, such as Gregory of Nyssa, and the rabbis of Palestine have the institutional mechanisms to impose firm boundaries.

Heavenly ascent texts are caught up in this re-evaluation. They provide prime examples of the inadequacy of the labels ‘Jewish’ and ‘Christian’. Davila has criticised the assumption that pseudepigrapha which “lack explicitly Christian content or elements, or whose explicitly Christian elements can be easily excised on redaction-critical grounds, were originally Jewish compositions” (2005, 3). 2 Enoch, for example, has been designated a Jewish pseudepigraphon dating from the first century C.E. (Orlov 2005, 9), and yet it was preserved by Christians, and is now studied thanks to medieval Old Slavonic manuscripts. The Aramaic Levi Document, fragments of which were found in the Cairo Genizah and at Qumran, may well be a source behind Testament of Levi. But, in its present form, Testament of Levi includes explicitly Christian passages. Does removing these ‘interpolations’ make it Jewish? De Jonge has argued that “a Jewish Grundschrift, if it existed at all, cannot possibly be reconstructed. The Testaments must be studied as a Christian composition which makes use of a surprising number of Jewish traditions, probably on the basis of acquaintance with written Jewish sources” (1999, 71). Frankfurter has suggested that texts such as Revelation, Ascension of Isaiah, and Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs might be “the work of continuous communities of
halakhically-observant Jewish groups – perhaps of a sectarian nature – that incorporated Jesus into their cosmologies and liturgies while retaining an essentially Jewish, or even *priestly, self-definition*” (2007, 134-5).

The paradigm of heavenly ascent was common to Jews, Christians and pagans. It could provide another wavy line, like ‘magic’, crossing the whole of Goodman’s final diagram. But different texts developed its potential in different ways, not all of which can be labelled straightforwardly ‘Jewish’ or ‘Christian’. It is no surprise that Gregory of Nyssa bought into heavenly ascent – it was part of the zeitgeist. “The antithesis of the heavens and the earth, closer to the stars, closer to the heavy matter of our world, *epouranios* and *epigeios*, runs obsessively through the literature of the period” (Brown 1978, 16). The question is how Gregory manipulated that paradigm in the service of orthodox Christian self-definition. This will come into focus by comparing his interpretation of heavenly ascent with a spectrum of other possibilities.

1.3.4 Jewish roots of Christian mysticism

McGinn writes,

The religious world of late Second Temple Judaism provided a matrix for Christian mysticism in two related ways – through the mystical, or at least protomystical, ascents to the vision of God found in the apocalypses, and through the movement toward the establishment of a canon of the sacred texts of Israel and the creation of the tools and techniques to render it continuously alive for the believing community. (1991, 22)

He is careful, however, not to overstate the influence of post-Second Temple Jewish texts, saying that “Merkavah mysticism ... would form a major topic for comparative study with early Christian mysticism, especially since both shared so much common background, but there is little evidence for any direct contact” (1991, 20). One forum for the discussion of pre-Kabbalistic Jewish and pre-Dionysiac Christian mysticism “across the traditional boundaries that have separated the study of Judaism and Christianity from each other” (DeConick 2006b, xvii) has been the Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism group of the Society of Biblical Literature. To celebrate its tenth anniversary, it published *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian mysticism* (DeConick 2006b). In her introductory essay, DeConick talks of the internalization of the apocalyptic heritage, the collapse of the cosmic into the personal: “The period-literature indicates that some Jews and Christians hoped to achieve *in the present* the eschatological dream, the restoration of God’s Image *within themselves* – the resurrection and transformation of their bodies into the glorious bodies of angels and their minds into
the mind of God” (2006b, 24). Another overview of scholarly explorations is provided by the website ‘Jewish Root of Eastern Christian Mysticism’ (http://www.marquette.edu/maqom/). It contains a cornucopia of articles, including sections on ‘Jewish Temple Traditions and Christian Liturgy’, ‘Instruction, Initiation, and Special Knowledge: Jewish and Christian Traditions’, and ‘Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Mysticism’. This thesis will show that the idea of a ‘tabernacle not made with hands’ has biblical and apocalyptic roots. And the issues with which Gregory wrestles, such as who has access to the heavenly mysteries, whether God can be seen or not, and the relationship between God’s essence and God’s names, also crop up in other traditions arising from the same heritage. The influence of Platonism on Christianity in general, and Gregory in particular, is enormous. And it is this, above all, which causes the divergence between Jewish and Christian mysticism. Stroumsa argues that, thanks to Platonism, Christian theologians – but not Jewish thinkers after Philo – “could claim the vision of God to be a spiritual vision, which had nothing to do with the vision of the corporal eyes” (2006, 72). Jews retained archaic patterns of thought for much longer, so that it is hard “to find a serious disengagement from anthropomorphic conceptions of God among Jews before Maimonides” (2006, 71). These differences in context, philosophical background, and language, must be taken seriously; but it is still possible to trace the trajectory of apocalyptic ideas through both Jewish and Christian traditions.
2 GREGORY OF NYSSA AND LIFE OF MOSES

2.1 Gregory’s life and works

Gregory of Nyssa was born in the 330s C.E. to a pious, wealthy, well-educated family of Pontus and Cappadocia. Thanks to his Life of St Macrina, Gregory of Nazianzus’ oration In Praise of Basil, and the letters of all three Cappadocian fathers, more is known about his life and family background than is the case with many patristic authors. Silvas (2007) provides a biography in the introduction to her translation of the letters by and about Gregory; and Van Dam (2003b) probes Cappadocian family relationships and friendships. Despite the comparative wealth of source material, however, questions remain, not least because the Cappadocian fathers carefully manipulated their self-presentation. The date of Basil’s death, a crucial event for Gregory, has been debated.\(^8\) Gregory probably married; did he even perhaps have a son?\(^9\) His rhetoric is not easy to decipher. Sivas comments that “Gregory manages to reveal himself and yet remain somehow elusive” (2007, 1). When, in Letter 10, he writes, “we are very distressed at the present state of affairs and our affliction has no end” (Silvas 2007, 148), is he talking about the situation in Nyssa in 375 (Daniélou 1965, 34), or his difficulties in Sebastia in 380 (Maraval 1990, 30, 184 n.1; Silvas 2007, 146-7), or the tensions between Helladius of Caesarea and himself in 383 (Daniélou 1966, 165)? As Maraval remarks, “on aimerait moins de plaintes et plus de faits!” (1990, 30).

Of the five boys born to Gregory’s mother, Emmelia, three – Basil, Gregory and Peter – became bishops, one, Naucratius, lived as a hermit and died in a hunting accident, and one must have died in infancy. The eldest child, Macrina, one of five daughters, resolved to stay single after the death of her fiancé, and persuaded her widowed mother to enter “into a common life with her maids, making them her sisters and equals rather than her slaves and underlings” (Macr.; Callahan 1967, 168). Gregory credits her with taking Basil in hand after he had become “excessively puffed up by his rhetorical abilities” (Macr.; Callahan 1967, 167). Unlike Basil, who studied in Constantinople and Athens, Gregory seems to have been educated nearer to home, acquiring nevertheless a sophisticated knowledge of philosophy and rhetoric. According to Gregory of Nazianzus (Epist. 11), Gregory of Nyssa abandoned an ecclesiastical career in order to become a rhetorician. But he must have returned to the church, for in 371 or 372, Basil, by then

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\(^8\) See Maraval (2004) and Silvas (2007, 32-9).

bishop of Caesarea, and locked into a power struggle with the bishop of Tyana, appointed him bishop of Nyssa. Basil reports that Gregory accepted the position reluctantly, being “constrained, under every necessity, to undertake the ministry” (Epist. 225; Silvas 2007, 84). In 375/6 he was accused of financial irregularities, deposed from his see, and sent into exile, probably as part of the Arian emperor Valens’ attempts to intimidate Basil. He was able to return to Nyssa in 377 or 378, around the time of Basil’s death. Within a year, Macrina too had died.

Daniélou (1966) divides Gregory’s works into three groups: those written before Basil’s death, starting with On Virginity; those written between 379 and 385, at the height of his ecclesiastical career; and those written after 386. The dating of his writings is not an exact science – there are few references to external datable events. Daniélou himself could change his mind: In 1955 he assigns On the Lord’s Prayer, On the Beatitudes, and On the Inscriptions of the Psalms to the end of Gregory’s life (1955a, 372); but by 1966 he has moved them to the first period, on the basis of their Platonic and Origenist themes, which become modified in later works (1966, 160-162). It does seem, however, that with Basil’s death, Gregory came into his own. He continued Basil’s dispute with the neo-Arian Eunomius in his three volume Against Eunomius. He also produced a number of shorter works on the Trinity, and refuted the Christology of Apollinaris. With On the Creation of Man, On the Soul and Resurrection, and On Infants Who Have Died Prematurely he provided a series of reflections on anthropological themes. There is no record of Gregory’s part in the debates of the Council of Constantinople in 381, but he was clearly an influential figure. He may have given the opening address; he certainly delivered the funeral oration for Meletius, the first president of the council, who died in the course of the first session. He was named, along with Helladius of Caesarea and Otreius of Melitene, as a guardian of orthodoxy in Cappadocia and Pontus. He also seems to have been sent by the council on an official mission to Arabia, after which he visited Jerusalem. Letter 3 suggests that a bitter doctrinal dispute took place there. In 385 he was chosen to deliver the funeral orations of the Emperor’s young daughter Pulcheria and, a few weeks later, of his wife Flacilla. His Great Catechetical Oration, written around that time, provides a comprehensive account of Christian theology.

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10 See Silvas (2007, 32-39) for difficulties over the dating.
Daniélou suggests that from around 387 Gregory “turned himself wholly towards the life of the spirit” (2001, 9), as exemplified by Life of Moses and On the Song of Songs. Not everyone agrees, as will be discussed below. Jerome, in his Lives of Illustrious Men, dated to 393, writes of Gregory as though he is still alive. He is known to have been present at a synod in 394; but no more is heard of him after that.

2.2 Life of Moses

Daniélou assigns Life of Moses to the end of Gregory’s life. Heine disagrees, and demolishes Daniélou’s arguments one by one (1975, 10-15). Gregory’s reference to his grey hairs (τῇ πολίᾳ) in Life of Moses 1.2 is a red herring, as he mentions them in Against Eunomius 2.605 (GNO 1.403.3), dated to before the Council of Constantinople. Heine concludes that the treatise may have been written when (1) Eunomius’ attacks on Basil and the whole Eunomian problem were very much alive in Gregory’s mind and (2) when Eunomianism was still causing many problems in the Cappadocian churches. The mid 380’s would be the most probable date for the first of these conditions; the second probably continued for some time thereafter. Although the exact date of writing remains obscure, we believe that the evidence for a late date is so tenuous that the treatise should not be approached with the a priori assumption that it was written at a time when theological controversy was far removed from Gregory’s thoughts. (1975, 15)

The real disagreement is not about dating, but about the nature of the treatise. Is it mysticism or polemical theology? Agreeing with Daniélou’s dating,11 does not preclude seeing the treatise differently. Mosshammer, for example, by comparing On the Beatitudes with On the Song of Songs, charts Gregory’s intellectual development not so much as a turning towards mysticism, as the discovery of an incarnational theology which takes the Church seriously. In the earlier work, “Gregory’s focus is on the upward journey of the individual soul from the cave of earthly darkness and deception towards the pure intelligence of the heavens” (2000, 360). In the later one, “the soul no longer stands alone” (2000, 379). It becomes truly itself by receiving Christ. And “each bridal soul both in her own progress and in her love for other souls contributes to the building of the Body of Christ” (2000, 385).

The Life of Moses is divided into two parts: Historia and Theoria. In part one Gregory summarises the life of Moses as told in Exodus, selected passages from Numbers, and Deuteronomy 34. In part two he seeks out “the spiritual understanding

11 See also May (1971, 63-4).
(διάνοια) which corresponds to the history in order to obtain suggestions of virtue” (Vit. Moys. 1.15). Macleod comments on “the freedom with which Gregory handles the text of Exodus and Numbers … The work omits many episodes narrated of Moses in the Bible; it is concerned simply with his life as a model of virtue” (1971, 372-3). Heine, on the other hand, notes that Gregory “deviates from the order of events in the Biblical text only three times in the entire treatise, and only one of these deviations seems to be of any significance as an intentional rearrangement of the order of the story” (1975, 99). There is truth in both comments. Gregory does make a selection from the biblical material. In the narrative about Mount Sinai, for example, he omits the covenant ceremony of Exodus 24, and the instructions about sacrifices and the Sabbath in Exodus 29-31. He chooses just ten episodes from the book of Numbers. And as Daniélou points out (2000, 17-20), even in his historia Gregory amplifies the biblical text, emphasises the miraculous, and suppresses shocking details. However, Heine is right that Gregory follows the biblical outline of Moses’ story. He certainly does not manipulate it into the threefold schema of light, cloud and darkness put forward by Daniélou. As Ludlow comments,

This leads to a slightly odd ending to The Life of Moses from a dramatic point-of-view – a gentle diminuendo rather than a grand finale – however, it fits with Gregory’s belief that knowing and loving God is a journey to be travelled eternally. This is symbolized by Moses’ death on the brink of the promised land: he has reached his goal and yet he will never quite be there (2002, 56)

Gregory seeks the ‘mind’ (διάνοια) of scripture. This includes not only the interpretation of individual episodes, but also the overarching aim (σκοπός) of the text, which is revealed in the orderly sequence (ἀκολουθία) of events. “What sets apart Gregory’s treatment of allegory is the attempt to find a structure and a sequence in the texts that he deals with” (Macleod 1971, 372). Gregory is influenced by Origen in his use of allegory, but, as Ludlow argues, “he is much more cautious than Origen about offering several interpretations of one text, or seeking out several layers of meaning”, because “over-speculative exegesis is ruled out by the controlling concept of the akolouthia, which is itself determined by the divine skopos in the text” (2002, 65). Malherbe and Ferguson discuss the criteria that Gregory, in common with other Alexandrian exegetes, employs for finding spiritual interpretations of the sacred text: An allegorical meaning becomes necessary when the literal meaning is unnecessary, superfluous, or out of place; when something morally wrong is enjoined in the biblical text; or when anything unworthy of God is suggested; as well as when it is impossible to reduplicate the exact historical circumstances (1978, 7-8). Examples of all these considerations can be found in Life of Moses. However, Gregory’s main concern should
not be seen as making sense of the difficulties of the biblical text. He is doing something more creative, as Macleod recognises:

The biblical life of Moses offers a framework and a collection of symbols within it. It stands to the allegorist as a myth to a poet or dramatist; it can both embody and shape his thought or feeling. And it is clear above all from Comm. in Cant., where Moses and the wanderings of the Israelites often appear in significant contexts, that the patriarch had lain for some time as a symbol in Gregory’s mind. … Allegory then might be positively valued as a kind of artistic form, capable of suggesting and expressing fresh connections of thought. (1971, 376)

The life of Moses is “a springboard for (Gregory’s) theology” (Macleod 1971, 374). He is constrained by the biblical text: by the order of events and the many peculiarities of the stories. Like a woodcarver, he has to incorporate these ‘knots’ into his creation. But his aim is to provide inspiration for a life of Christian virtue.
3 CONTEXTS

3.1 Biblical context

Heavenly ascent texts, including the tabernacle passage in Life of Moses, abound with biblical allusions. Wherever one stands in the scholarly debates about the balance of exegesis and personal experience in apocalyptic and other heavenly ascent traditions, there is no doubt that a number of key biblical texts have shaped those traditions. As McGinn says, referring to both Jewish and Christian mystical traditions, the Bible served “as the inexhaustible living source from which the book of experience drew its sustenance” (2005, 87). Below are short introductions to the tabernacle narrative in Exodus, Ezekiel 1, and the Pauline material mined by Gregory, indicating those features of interest to subsequent interpreters. They are not the only biblical passages elaborated upon by heavenly ascent texts – Gregory also quotes from the psalms; Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice alludes to the ‘still small voice’ of 1Kings 19:12; nearly everywhere Isaiah’s seraphim merge with Ezekiel’s cherubim – but these texts require some introductory remarks for the later developments to make sense.

3.1.1 Exodus 25-28

On Mount Sinai, surrounded by the divine cloud, Moses is shown the pattern (תבנית; παράδειγμα) of the tabernacle (משכן; σκηνή). The detailed instructions are no longer entirely comprehensible: the measurements are unclear and some of the technical terms obscure. The basic layout, however, is clear: an outer courtyard within which stands a tent divided into two. The tent has three or four layers of coverings. The inner curtains are made of “fine twined linen and blue and purple and scarlet (yarns)” (26:1) with a design of cherubim worked into them. The larger compartment is the holy place, the smaller one the holy of holies, and between them hangs a veil (פרכת; καταπέτασμα), made of the same material as the inner curtains (26:31). In the courtyard stand an altar (27:1-8) and a bronze laver (30:17-21). In the holy place are the table for the ‘bread of the Presence’ (25:23-30), the seven branch lampstand (25:31-40) and the altar of incense (30:1-10). In the holy of holies is the ark containing the ‘testimony’ (עדת; τὰ μαρτύρια): the two stone tablets inscribed by the finger of God (31:18, 34:1). It is covered by the ‘mercy seat’ (כפרת; ἱλαστήριον), which is adorned by two golden cherubim, one at each end (25:10-22). The wings of the cherubim overshadow the mercy seat; their faces are turned to one another, but facing downwards towards the ark. Moses is told that God
will speak with him “from above the mercy seat” (25:22). “The Divine Presence was believed to settle, as it were, in the space between the two cherubim above the Ark”, which fits with a conception of the ark “as a footstool beneath the invisible throne of God” (Sarna 1996, 210).

After describing the tabernacle, the text details the high priest’s clothing. He was to wear eight items, six of them listed in 28:4: a breastpiece ( Yönetיע 28:4, λόγιον/λογεῖον 28:15), an ephod ( אפוד; ἐπωμίς), a robe ( מעיל; ποδήρης 28:4, υποδύτης ποδήρη 28:27(31)), a fringed or chequered tunic ( חנית תשבי; χιτών κοσυμβωτόν), a turban ( מצנפת; κίδαρις 28:4, μίτρα 28:33(37)), and a sash ( אבנט; ζώνη). Two items are mentioned later: a plate of pure gold ( ציץ זהב טהור 28:36; πέταλον χρυσοῦν καθαρόν 28:32(36)), and linen breeches (מכנסי־בד 28:42; περισκελῆ λινᾶ 28:38(42)). The ephod was to be of the same fine linen and coloured yarns as the tabernacle curtains, with the addition of gold thread. It is unclear “whether the ephod covered the lower and/or upper parts of the body and whether the back and/or front” (Sarna 1991, 178). It had two shoulder pieces, each with a stone engraved with the names of six of the sons of Israel. Fastened to the ephod was the breastpiece, probably a pouch of some sort. It too was made of the multicoloured fabric with gold thread. Set onto it were twelve stones; and contained within it were the Urim and Thummin (MT 28:30; LXX ἡ δήλωσις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια 28:26(30)). Underneath these, the high priest wore the blue robe; and inside that the tunic. Like other priests, he wore linen breeches. His turban was surmounted by a gold headdress, engraved with the words ‘Holy to the Lord’. The Hebrew term ציץ usually means ‘a blossom, flower’. Elsewhere the headdress is referred to as a diadem/crown ( נזר 29:6). The brilliant, colourful nature of these clothes is in sharp contrast to the plain linen (בד; λίνεος) garments prescribed by Leviticus 16:4 for the high priest’s yearly entry into the holy of holies.

In chapters 35-40 of the MT the description of the tabernacle and vestments is repeated, as their fabrication takes place. The LXX departs from the MT, both in order and content; and in this second account often uses different Greek words to translate the same Hebrew technical terms. At the end of Exodus, however, the MT and the LXX converge again as they describe the descent of God’s glory:
Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (הב יוהי מלא א荐השכ). (40:34)

3.1.2 Ezekiel 1

In the first chapter of Ezekiel, the prophet has a vision of a mobile throne supported by four living creatures (חיות). This subsequently became known as the merkavah, as shown by Ben Sira and Pseudo-Ezekiel, both dated to the 2nd century B.C.E.:

Ezekiel beheld the vision and described the different creatures of the chariot throne (זני מרכבה) ...

The vision which Ezekiel saw [...] the gleam of the chariot (גњה מרכבה) and four living creatures ...

The earliest witness to this designation may be the LXX translation of Ezekiel, dating from the 3rd or 2nd century B.C.E. At 43:3 it reads, “... and the vision of the chariot (ἡ ἕρασις τοῦ ἑρματος) which I saw was like the vision which I saw at the river Chebar ...”. Halperin favours the view “that the translator's text was … the same as MT; and that the tou harmatos is a midrashic rendering that presupposes merkābâh as a standard designation for the entity seen by Ezekiel at the River Chebar” (1982, 354). The term merkavah is also used in 1 Chronicles 28:18, in the course of David’s instructions to Solomon about the construction of the temple:

... also his plan for the golden chariot of the cherubim (ולתבנית המרכבה הכרובים) that spread their wings and covered the ark of the covenant of the Lord.

These references would seem to be drawing on a much older Israelite tradition of God “enthroned on the cherubim” (Ps 80:1, 99:1, cf. 18:10). The ‘living creatures’ of Ezekiel 1 are identified as cherubim in 10:20. The exact relationship between Chronicles and Ezekiel is unclear. Did Ezekiel draw upon the tradition recorded in Chronicles of a ‘chariot’ in the holy of holies to imply that God could leave the temple and appear in Babylon? However, as Alexander points out, “it is odd that (Ezekiel) does not actually take over the useful term merkabah” (2006a, 68). Or was the Chronicler alluding to Ezekiel’s vision, already known as the merkavah? Either way, Ezekiel’s vision of the merkavah became a key biblical text for later Jewish mystics. Its influence can be seen in Revelation’s description of the heavenly throne with its four living creatures.
3.1.3  **Paul’s letters**12

Gregory interprets 2 Corinthians 12:2-5 as a description of Paul’s ascent to the supercelestial sanctuary. He therefore considers Paul to be a reliable guide to “the mysteries of Paradise” (Vit. Moys. 2.178). He refers to him – the great Apostle – twelve times in his tabernacle interpretation (2.173, 174, 178, 179, 182 x2, 184 x2, 192, 193, 194 x2), and manages to include a quotation from, or allusion to, every Pauline letter other than 2 Thessalonians, 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon.13 He assumes that Hebrews was written by Paul, and therefore includes its interpretation of the tabernacle curtain as the flesh of Jesus, even though it does not fit his overall scheme. He makes particularly creative use of Colossians 1:15-20. He seems to take the ‘fullness’ (πλήρωμα) in 1:19 and 2:9 as linked to the verb πληθώ in Exodus 40:34: Christ, like the tabernacle, is filled with the fullness/glory of God.14 He then uses Col 1:16 to argue that the heavenly powers created in Christ are represented by the furniture in the tabernacle.

3.2  **Alexandrian context**

3.2.1  **Philo**

In part one of *On Moses* Philo presents a comparatively straightforward biography of Moses, depicting him as a philosopher-king; in part two he discusses his offices of legislator, priest and prophet. While considering Moses as priest, he gives lengthy commentaries on the cosmological symbolism of both the tabernacle and the high priest’s vestments (2.71-135). He says, for example, that the lampstand figures “the movements of the luminaries above” (2.102). Josephus gives a similar cosmological interpretation (*A.J.* 3.102-224; *B.J.* 5.184-237); but there are differences in detail, and Philo presents his interpretation within a Platonic framework: Moses sees “with the soul’s eye the immaterial forms (ἀσωμάτους ἰδέας) of the material objects about to be made” (2.74). Geljon has shown that Gregory studied Philo’s *On Moses* (2002, 160). In *Questions on Exodus* 2.51-124, Philo works systematically through Exodus 25 – 28. He presents some of the same symbolism as in *On Moses*, but also comments on the soul as a shrine of God

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12 This study does not distinguish between authentic Pauline letters and those written pseudonymously, since Gregory, like other church fathers, did not do so.

13 The full list of quotations/allusions is as follows: 1 Cor 2:10, 1 Cor 14:2 (2.173); 1 Cor 1:24 (174); Col 1:17 (175); Col 2:9 (177); Heb 10:20, 2 Cor 12:3-4 (178); Col 1:16 (179); Rom 3:25, Phil 2:10, Heb 13:15 (182); 1 Cor 12:12-13, Eph 1:22-3, 1 Cor 12:28, Gal 2:9, Phil 2:15, 1 Cor 15:58, 1 Tim 3:15 (184); 1 Cor 9:27 (187); Rom 12:1, 1 Thess 4:17 (191); 1 Tim 1:19 (192); Heb 12:11 (193); 1 Cor 9:13-14, 1 Cor 9:18, 1 Cor 4:11 (194); 2 Cor 6:7 (198).

14 For more details see Conway-Jones (2009, 231-3).
(2.51, 53-5). And he elaborates on the hierarchy of powers to be found in the holy of holies (2.68; cf. Fug. 100-1).

3.2.2 Clement

In Miscellanies 5.32-40 Clement discusses the symbolism of the temple, as one example of the way in which Scripture speaks in enigmas. As van den Hoek demonstrates, he is dependent on Philo’s On Moses, but more for his structure than for the direction of his thought. “He remodels Philo’s cosmology in a Christological, Gnostic and eschatological sense” (1988, 146). He quotes not only from Philo, but also from Plato (5.33.5) and Pseudo-Euripides (5.36.1); and from other sources which cannot now be identified. At times he piles up interpretations, some of them contradictory, as when he discusses the cherubim. Mondésert is dismissive about the coherence of the passage: “il n’y a là que des pierres détachées” (1944, 182). Van den Hoek, on the other hand, argues that the christological comments which Clement interjects into the Philonic and classical material act as “preludes to the decisive, concluding Christian interpretation” (1988, 142). The passage ends with a commentary on Leviticus 16, in which the high priest represents the “spiritual and perfect man” who becomes “replenished with insatiable contemplation face to face” (5.40.1; van den Hoek 1988, 141). Kovacs remarks, “As far as I know, no one has investigated the question of how much of Clement’s work was read by Gregory and the other Cappadocians” (2000, 323 n.40). But whether Gregory knew this passage from Miscellanies or not, it demonstrates how Philo’s cosmological interpretation was remoulded by second century Alexandrian theology.

3.2.3 Excerpts from Theodotus

DeConick describes Valentinianism as “one of the earliest Alexandrian schools of Christian theology” (1999, 308). Excerpts from Theodotus contains extracts from the writings of Theodotus, assumed to be a pupil of Valentinus, together with comments by Clement, and possibly other material as well. It is not always easy to discern where quotations from Theodotus end and comments by Clement begin; and the presentation of Theodotus’ teachings is extremely disjointed: “No coherent account of Theodotus’ system can be seen in the material presented, but a basic Valentinian myth lies in the background and is reflected here and there” (Pearson 2007, 165). More detail of that Valentinian myth is provided by Irenaeus: Against Heresies 1.1-8 seems to be drawing on the same source as Excerpts from Theodotus 42-65, although, given Irenaeus’
polemical intent, his statements need to be treated with caution. There is no agreement as to whether Exc. 27, which interprets the entry of the high priest into the holy of holies as the soul’s passage into the spiritual realm (τὰ πνευματικά), belongs to Theodotus or Clement. Lilla (1971, 177-9) and DeConick (1998, 523 n.61) assign it to Theodotus (or some other Gnostic writer); Casey (1934, 9-16), Sagnard (1948, 11), Pearson (2007, 165) and Kovacs disagree. Kovacs argues that it represents “the further elaboration of Clement’s exegesis of the tabernacle” (1997, 433).

3.2.4 Origen

Origen consistently interprets the tabernacle as symbolic of the church and its members. He appeals to his congregation to “make a sanctuary for the Lord both collectively and individually” (Hom. Exod. 9.3; Heine 1982, 338). In Homilies on Exodus (9 and 13) and Homilies on Numbers (5) he unpacks the symbolism of each item of furniture, paying close attention to the details of the biblical text. In Commentary on Romans (3.8) he interprets the mercy-seat as the soul of Jesus, and the ark of the covenant as his holy flesh. The cherubim signify “that the Word of God, who is the only begotten Son, and his Holy Spirit always dwell in the propitiatory, that is, in the soul of Jesus” (Comm. Rom. 3.8.5; Scheck 2001, 220). In Homilies on Leviticus (6) he tackles the priestly vestments, taking them to represent the virtues with which believers should adorn themselves. McGuckin says that the homilies “generally represent a simpler and more pastoral face of Origen” but that “this argument ought not to be forced too much, as the students of his Schola would have been in constant attendance on him” (2004, 28).

The homilies on Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers now only exist in Rufinus’ Latin translation. There are a few Greek fragments of Commentary on Romans, but for most of this too we are reliant on Rufinus. McGuckin says of him,

Rufinus is generally a reliable translator, but ... many scholars regard his translations as having been largely “sense related” and, for long works, reductively paraphrastic. (2004, 31)

This makes it impossible to compare the wording of Origen and Gregory’s tabernacle interpretations in detail.

3.3 Theological context

3.3.1 Theological disputes

The council of Nicaea, in 325, declared the Son to be homoousios with the Father. This was reaffirmed by the council of Constantinople in 381. For much of the
intervening period, however, the concept was the subject of intense debate. Gregory championed a Trinitarian formula of one ousia and three hypostases. His fiercest arguments were with Eunomius of Cyzicus, who had first entered into dispute with his brother Basil. Eunomius declared the Begotten Son to be subordinate to the Unbegotten God, whose essence was defined by that name ‘Unbegotten’. Gregory wrote four treatises against him: Against Eunomius 1-3 and Refutation of the Confession of Faith of Eunomius. He insisted on the true deity of Christ, developing in the process a sophisticated understanding of the nature of language in relation to God. As already noted, the extent of the influence of Gregory’s polemic against Eunomius on Life of Moses is one area of disagreement between Daniélou and Heine. Gregory also argued against the Christology of Apollinarius of Laodicea, who described Jesus as the divine Logos within human flesh. Gregory insisted on the full humanity of Jesus, including a human mind. But his own Christology was judged untenable by the standards laid down in the 5th century. He talks of Jesus “as a human being, an ἄνθρωπος, who is ‘taken up’ or ‘appropriated’ by God the Logos”. After the resurrection, his entire humanity was “swallowed up in the eternal reality of the glorified Son, like a drop of water lost in a boundless ocean” (Daley 2002, 471).

3.3.2 The fourth century church

Gregory lived at a turning point in Christian history. By the time he was born, the days of persecution were over; but it was by no means clear that paganism was a spent force. The reign of Julian the Apostate (360-2), when practising Christians were forbidden to teach in schools and universities, was yet to come. It was only in 391, at the end of Gregory’s life, that pagan sacrifices were prohibited. The fourth century also saw a shift from individual Christian asceticism to cenobitic living, with the widespread establishment of monastic communities. Living a monastic lifestyle replaced martyrdom as the way of witnessing to Christianity’s defiance of the world. Gregory’s family were key players, with both his sister Macrina and his brother Basil establishing monasteries. Basil’s Rules laid the foundations of eastern monasticism. One of his aims was to contain ascetic fervour within the confines of the institutional church. From Constantine’s reign onwards, there was an explosion of ecclesiastical construction. Worship could now be held in public, in purpose built basilicas. Gregory commissioned an octagonal martyrion at Nyssa, which he described in a letter to Amphilochius of Iconium (Silvas 2007, 196-202). To go with the new buildings, more and more elaborate
liturgies were devised, drawing on both Old Testament priestly traditions and imperial court ritual.

### 3.4 Heavenly ascent context

It is the heuristic comparison between *Life of Moses* and heavenly ascent texts which is the innovative aspect of this thesis. Below are introductions to the heavenly ascent texts used. It is not an exhaustive list. Other texts, such as the Similitudes of Enoch (1 Enoch 37-71), the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, 3 *Baruch*, or the *Apocalypse of Paul* could have been included. But those chosen span a range of dates, genres and religious affiliation; and they include features which have proved useful for the purposes of this study. In particular, some of their content relates to the topics addressed by Gregory, such as ‘darkness’, ‘the tabernacle not made with hands’, ‘divine names’, and ‘priestly vestments’.

#### 3.4.1 1 Enoch 14

*1 Enoch* is a long, rambling book of 108 chapters, which scholars divide into sections dating from different times. Chapter 14 falls within the Book of the Watchers (chapters 1-36), dated to the 3rd century B.C.E. Fragments of the Book of the Watchers in Aramaic, including some of chapter 14, were found at Qumran; and most scholars think that Aramaic, rather than Hebrew, was the original language. Complete copies of the Book of the Watchers have been preserved in Greek and Ethiopic. 1 Enoch 14 represents “an important transition from the older Ezekiel tradition of the prophetic call to the much later tradition of Jewish Merkabah mysticism” (Nickelsburg 2001, 259). In particular, this is the first Jewish text to describe an ascent to heaven in unequivocal terms. Enoch dreams of being whirled up to heaven, where he passes through a threefold structure to behold the Great Glory sitting on a crystalline throne, surrounded by myriads of angels. Himmelfarb sees in *1 Enoch* a mild condemnation of the Jerusalem priesthood (1993a, 22). Schäfer understands it “as a devastating critique of the Temple in Jerusalem”, as Enoch’s vision could even imply that the Holy of Holies in the earthly Temple is empty and God has withdrawn himself to his Temple in heaven (2009, 66). *1 Enoch* was held in high regard by second century Christians, but Origen exhibits doubts about it, and Jerome associates it with the teachings of the Manicheans (Adler 1996, 23).
3.4.2  Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice

*Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* was unknown until its discovery at Qumran.

Fragments of ten manuscripts have survived: eight from Cave 4 (4Q400-407), one from Cave 11 (11Q17), and one from Masada (Mas1k). The oldest manuscript has been dated to the late Hasmonean period (ca. 75-50 B.C.E.), and the youngest to the middle of the first century C.E. The first editor, John Strugnell, coined the title *Shirot 'Olat Ha-Shabbat*, on the basis of the headings which introduce each song. Carol Newson’s 1985 edition made all the material available. She reconstructed the fragmentary manuscripts into thirteen songs, which she suggested were designed to be sung on the first thirteen Sabbaths of the year. Initially Newsom suggested that *Sabbath Songs* was a sectarian composition (1985, 4), but later changed her mind (Charlesworth & Newsom 1999, 4). Alexander proposes that it “may be a Qumranian reworking of an originally Jerusalemite temple liturgy” (2006a, 97). It has been suggested by Newsom (1987, 14), Nitzan (1994, 183), Alexander (2006a, 44) and Morray-Jones (Rowland & Morray-Jones 2009, 325-6) that the liturgical poetry of *Sabbath Songs* aims to create a mystical experience of communion with the angels in their heavenly worship. Fletcher-Louis disagrees, arguing that its language refers not to the heavenly temple, but “to the Qumran community members who now have a heavenly, angelic and divine identity” (1998, 369). Alexander points out that this is beset by a number of problems, not least that without a heavenly temple there are no angels for an angelomorphic community to resemble (2006a, 46). Schäfer accuses Morray-Jones of confusing the textual level (the heavenly ritual) and the performative level (the enacting of the text in the worship of the sectarians). He argues that the earthly community urgently calls on the angels to praise God and offer the celestial sacrifice (now crucial, given that earthly sacrifices have become corrupt); but is reluctant to associate this with an ascent to heaven (2009, 144-6).

3.4.3  Testament of Levi

*Testament of Levi* is one of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, which purport to convey the final utterances of Jacob’s twelve sons. The *Testaments* were written in Greek, and contain some Christian material. Kee argues that the Christian interpolations “may be readily differentiated from the original Greek text”, and attributes the “basic writing” to a Hellenized Jew living in the Maccabean period (1983, 777-8). Hollander and de Jonge argue that “it is practically impossible to answer the question whether there ever existed Jewish Testaments” and that “our first and foremost task is to try to interpret the Testaments as they lie before us” (1985, 85). They suggest that the *Testaments*
received their present form during the second half of the second century in Christian circles. In the case of Testament of Levi, however, some of the source material has been identified. Fragments of an Aramaic document dealing with Levi were discovered in the Cairo Genizah, and at Qumran. The Aramaic Levi Document is generally thought to be a non-sectarian treatise, dating from the third or early second century B.C.E, highly prized by the Qumran community. Its exact relationship with the Greek Testament of Levi has been much discussed. In Testament of Levi, Levi ascends to heaven twice (2:5-5:2 and 8:1-19). At the end of the first ascent he receives his priestly commission. The second consists of an investiture ceremony, during which he is clothed in priestly apparel. Both Origen and Jerome mention the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (Hollander & de Jonge 1985, 15), although not Testament of Levi specifically.

3.4.4 2 Enoch

2 Enoch is a puzzling work found in Slavonic manuscripts dating from the fourteenth century onwards. Most scholars agree that it was translated from the Greek. The text contains many Semitisms, indicating either Hebrew (or Aramaic) sources behind the Greek, or the adoption of a biblical style in the Greek. Charles assigned it to between 30 B.C.E and 70 C.E. (1913, 429), Milik to the ninth or tenth centuries C.E. (1976, 112).

Some have argued that it is Christian (Vaillant 1952, viii-xiii; Milik 1976, 112), most that it is Jewish. Opinions on the place of writing are as varied: Charles argued for Alexandria (1913, 429), Milik for Byzantium (1976, 112). Andersen comments, “2 Enoch could derive from any region in which Jewish, Greek, Egyptian, and other Near Eastern ideas mingled” (1983, 96). Orlov argues that “the text was composed at a time when the Second Temple was still standing” (2005, 330), and first century Diaspora Judaism currently seems to be the favoured theory. Himmelfarb suggests an Egyptian provenance (1993a, 43). However, given the time lag between this proposed date of composition and the date of the manuscripts, there is no certainty that any particular element of the text was there in the ‘original’. The problems are compounded by the variation in the manuscripts. The text never exists on its own, only as part of larger works, usually collections of miscellaneous pieces. Two recensions have been proposed, a longer and a shorter one. There is no consensus on which is the earlier: Charles argued


16 The case for an Egyptian provenance has been strengthened by the recent discovery of Coptic fragments of 2 Enoch. The details will be published by Hagen (forthcoming).
for the longer recension (Charles & Morfill 1896, xv). Vaillant for the shorter one (1952, iv).

Andersen cautions,

The textual history of this work is probably beyond recovery; it is very complicated, and in all likelihood there have been deletions and interpolations in both recensions. (1992, 519)

Even within manuscripts supposedly of the same recension, there is much variation.

2 Enoch 1-20 tells the story of Enoch’s journey through the seven heavens (ten in the longer recension) accompanied by two angels, huge men with fiery faces and golden wings. In the seventh heaven he is transformed, becoming “like one of the glorious ones” (22:10; Andersen 1983, 139). Odeberg (1973, 55) and Orlov (2005, 156) take this to mean that he is made a ‘Prince of the Presence’. Greenfield (1973, xxiii) and Alexander (1977, 160) argue for a less dramatic interpretation, in which Enoch assumes the same kind of spiritual body as the righteous dead receive in heaven.

3.4.5 Ascension of Isaiah

Ascension of Isaiah is often described as a Jewish-Christian apocalypse. Frankfurter cautions that it is texts like Ascension of Isaiah which expose the deficiencies of such theological categories as ‘Christian’, ‘Jewish’ or ‘Jewish-Christian’ and challenge us “to reconstruct historical nuances of identity” (2007, 137). It falls into two parts – an account of Isaiah’s martyrdom (1-5) and a report of his visionary ascent to heaven (6-11) – which has led to speculation about two (or more) sources. Hall argues that the final redaction “stems from an early Christian prophetic school” of “the end of the first or more probably the beginning of the second century CE” (1990a, 306). Although probably originally written in Greek, the work now exists in its entirety only in an Ethiopic translation. One Greek fragment of 2:4 - 4:4 has survived, and there are translations of 6-11 into Slavonic, Latin and Coptic. It is Isaiah’s vision of ascending through the seven heavens to see the Great Glory flanked by the Lord and the angel of the Holy Spirit which concerns us here. The culmination of Isaiah’s vision is to be shown Christ’s descent; his birth, life, death and resurrection; and his ascension back to heaven. Gregory’s sermon On the Ascension of Christ seems to draw on the description of Christ taking the form of the angels in each of the heavens he passes through on his way down (GNO 9.325-6; Daniélou 1964, 209 n.10). Therefore, unlike most of the heavenly ascent texts being used in this study, this one may well have been familiar to him.
3.4.6  Hekhalot texts

The Hekhalot Literature has survived in medieval manuscripts produced by the Ḥasidei Ashkenaz, and in fragments found in the Cairo Genizah. The name refers to the palaces (היכלות) through which the ‘descender to the merkavah’ (יורד למרכבה) must journey. Schäfer describes it as “an extremely fluid literature” (1988b, 15). He therefore refers not to ‘works’ or ‘texts’ but ‘macroforms’, composed of smaller ‘microforms’. They reflect “a long process of evolution, from Palestine in the third or fourth centuries to Babylonia in the late Geonic period” (Swartz 1992, 220). Schäfer’s Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur is a synoptic edition of seven of the best manuscripts containing the major macroforms. This study will refer to Hekhalot Rabbati (§§81-306), Hekhalot Zutarti (§§335-517), Ma’aseh Merkavah (§§544-596) and 3 Enoch (§§1-79). Halperin writes,

Open Schäfer’s Synopse at any point … and you find yourself plunged into a swirl of hymns, incantations, divine names, and fantastic descriptions of heavenly beings. All of this seems to be assembled in no discernable pattern and to no discernable purpose. Every now and again the name of a rabbi, usually “Ishmael” or “Akiba” or “Nehuniah b. ha-Qanah,” floats to the surface. Very occasionally, there is something that looks like a narrative. (1988b, 367)

3 Enoch, which contains no theurgic incantations, stands apart from the other macroforms. It appears to be “a late fusion of Hekhalot and apocalyptic narrative traditions” (Swartz 2006, 411).

3.4.7  B. Hagigah 11b – 16a

m. Hagigah. 2:1 begins,

ʻArayot18 may not be expounded by three, nor maʻaseh bереşit by two, nor the merkabah by an individual, unless he is a scholar and has understood on his own. (Halperin 1980, 11-12)

The Tosephta19 and both Talmuds comment on this mishnah. All three tell the story of the four who entered pardes and their respective fates.20 But the Bavli’s discussion of m. Hagigah 2:1 “is much more comprehensive and complex than any of its parallels” (Schäfer 2009, 222). In the story of pardes, it inserts a reference to a water test, which is described in more detail in Hekhalot Zutarti. And it tells of Aḥer’s ascent to heaven,

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17 No satisfactory explanation has been found for this terminology, used in Hekhalot Rabbati. See Schäfer (1992, 2-3 n.4).

18 Forbidden sexual relations: Leviticus 18 and 20.

19 The relationship between the Mishnah and the Tosephta is the subject of debate. See Tropper (2010, 96-7) and Reichman (2010, 118-9).

20 t. Hag. 2:3-4; y. Hag. 2:1 fol. 77b; b. Hag. 14b, 15a,b.
where he sees Metatron seated and exclaims “Perhaps, God forbid, there are two Divine powers” (Halperin 1980, 168). There has been much debate about what ‘expounding (the work of) the chariot’ might mean. Halperin (1980, 179) and Schäfer (2009, 211) insist that in the Mishnah, Tosephta and Yerushalmi it refers to the exegetical activity of interpreting the first chapter of Ezekiel. Only in the Bavli, where there is influence from apocalyptic and Hekhalot texts, is there a “slow and still rudimentary infiltration of a tradition that identifies the Merkavah exegesis with an ascent to the Merkavah” (Schäfer 2009, 194; cf. Halperin 1988b, 37). Morray-Jones, on the other hand, objects to “a sharp distinction between the exegetical activity described in the Talmudic sources and the visionary mysticism of the hekhalot writings” (Rowland & Morray-Jones 2009, 258; cf. Wolfson 1994b, 121-2). He argues that “what the rabbinic writers called maase merkava” was the same tradition of “performative exegesis” as found in Hekhalot Zutarti (Rowland & Morray-Jones 2009, 259).
4 LIFE OF MOSES 2.162-201

4.1 Heavenly ascents

(Moses) comes to the tabernacle not made with hands. Who will follow someone who makes his way through such places and elevates his mind to such heights, who, as though he were passing from one peak to another, comes ever higher than he was through his ascent to the heights? (Vit. Moys. 2.167)

4.1.1 Gregory’s use of the heavenly ascent paradigm

According to modern scholars, there are no ascent narratives in the Bible: “Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible is the gap between heaven and earth bridged in such a way that a human being leaves his place on earth and explores heaven” (Schäfer 2009, 53). Gregory would not agree. According to him, not only was Moses vouchsafed a vision of the heavenly tabernacle, but other biblical figures had similar experiences:

Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says, No one has ever seen God … (2.163)

… as David says, who also was initiated into the mysteries in the same inner sanctuary… (2.164)

Doubtless (Paul) himself had a vision of the tabernacle when he entered the supercelestial sanctuary where the mysteries of Paradise were revealed to him by the Spirit. (2.178)

… those powers which we see around the divine nature, which powers Isaiah and Ezekiel perceived. (2.180)

And because those people saw what Moses saw, Gregory considers that their writings can be used to elucidate Exodus. He works within a framework in which exceptional individuals are believed to have been “initiated into the mysteries” of the supercelestial sanctuary. This is the framework of heavenly ascent, a framework which, in a wide variety of guises, was common to all Late Antique cultures, pagan, Jewish and Christian. Segal states,

It is possible to see the heavenly journey of the soul, its consequent promise of immortality and the corollary necessity of periodic ecstatic journeys to heaven as the dominant mythical constellation of late classical antiquity. (1980, 1388)

McGinn demurs only slightly: “The claim to dominance aside, there can be no question of the importance of these visionary ascensions” (1991, 14). The question therefore is

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21 See also Himmelfarb (1993a, 9) or Nickelsburg (2001, 259-61). Joyce demurs, suggesting that Ezekiel 40-42, the prophet’s Temple vision, can be viewed as the first ‘heavenly ascent’ narrative (2007a). Morray-Jones warns not overstate the distinction between the visions of the biblical prophets and the heavenly ascents described by later apocalyptic writers (Rowland & Morray-Jones 2009, 303-5).
not whether Gregory worked within a framework of heavenly ascent, but how he reconciled it with the biblical text, and then tailored it to his own needs. The heuristic comparison we are embarking upon involves comparing his writings with other works produced or read during Late Antiquity, so that his particular shaping of the framework can be discerned.

McGinn sees both the apocalypses and the philosophical-religious tradition begun by Plato as “major components of the background of Christian mysticism” (1991, 5). Gregory’s dependence on Platonic tradition has been thoroughly explored. He works with the Platonic division between the sensible and noetic worlds, even if he then superimposes upon it a gulf dividing Creator and creation. Daniélou points out that one of Gregory’s favourite words for describing contemplation is μετεωροπορεῖν - to travel on high (1954, 151). One of the examples he cites is from Gregory’s eulogy to his brother Basil:

He … hastened with his soul into the beyond, and, overstepping the sensible boundary of the world, ever trod what is perceptible to the mind (αἰ̂ς τοῖς νοητοῖς ἐμβατεύειν), and walked on high with the divine powers (συμμετεωροπορεῖν ταῖς θείαις δύναμεσι), in no way hindered in the progress of his mind by the impediment of the body. (GNO 10,1.131.13-18; Stein 1928, 53, amended)

The same verb is used by Plato in Phaedrus:

Soul, considered collectively, has the care of all that which is soulless, and it traverses the whole heaven, appearing sometimes in one form and sometimes in another; now when it is perfect and fully winged, it mounts upward (ἐπτερωμένη μετεωροπορεῖ) and governs the whole world … (246BC)

As Daniélou says, “le Platon de Grégoire, c’est le Platon des myths” (1954, 154). But Gregory depends not only on Platonism for his imagery. When he describes Basil circulating with “the divine powers”, he conceives of those heavenly powers in personal terms. The Platonic χώσμος νοητός has become the angelic world. This can be illustrated by an extract from On the Song of Songs:

She (the bride/soul) gets up again and in spirit traverses the entire spiritual and transcendental world, which she calls here a city (Song 3:2). Here there are principalities and dominations and thrones assigned to powers, and gatherings of heavenly hosts (which she calls the market place) and an innumerable multitude (which she call the broad ways), and through all she hopes to find Him Whom she loves. In her search she surveys the entire angelic army. (GNO 6.182; Musurillo 2001, 202)

22 According to Liddell and Scott, there is a variant reading μετεωροπολεῖ (1940, 1120). That word is used by Philo; see 4.1.2.
Angels come from Christianity’s biblical and apocalyptic heritage, not from Platonism. It therefore makes sense to explore Gregory’s imagery in the context of other Jewish and Christian heavenly ascent texts which arise out of this heritage.

4.1.2 Alexandrian context

According to Segal, “Philo … represents a full actualization of philosophic possibilities of the ascension structure which were developed in the Hellenistic Age” (1980, 1354). Philo uses it to describe both his own experience:

There was a time when I had leisure for philosophy … (I) seemed always to be borne aloft into the heights with a soul possessed by some God-sent inspiration, a fellow-traveller with the sun and moon and the whole heaven and universe. Ah then I gazed down from the upper air, and straining the mind’s eye beheld, as from some commanding peak, the multitudinous world-wide spectacles of earthly things, and blessed my lot in that I had escaped by main force from the plagues of mortal life. (Spec. 3.1-3)

and that of others:

The soul of the lover of God does in truth leap from earth to heaven and wing its way on high (πτερωθεῖσα μετεωροπολεῖ), eager to take its place in the ranks and share the ordered march of sun and moon and the all-holy, all-harmonious host of the other stars, marshalled and led by the God Whose kingship none can dispute or usurp ... (Spec. 1.207)

He ties this Hellenistic ascent structure to the Bible by allegorising the lives of biblical figures. On Abraham presents Enosh (7-16), Enoch (17-26) and Noah (27-47) as a “first trinity of those who yearn for virtue” (48), and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as a second greater trinity, who stretch “the eyesight of the soul” (58) to reach God, the Father and Maker of all. In On the Posterity of Cain he suggests that Moses is superior to the patriarchs:

Moses, the man wise in all things … does not, like those before him, haunt the outer court of the Holy Place as one seeking initiation, but as a sacred Guide (ἱεροφάντης) has his abode in the sanctuary (ἐν τοῖς ἄδυτοις). (Post. 173)

This sanctuary is the darkness of Mount Sinai:

… entering the darkness, the invisible region, (Moses) abides there while he learns the secrets of the most holy mysteries. There he becomes not only one of the congregation of the initiated, but also the hierophant and teacher of divine rites, which he will impart to those whose ears are purified. (Gig. 54)

In Questions on Exodus the entry into the darkness becomes an ascent to God:

What is the meaning of the words, “Come up to Me to the mountain and be there” (Ex 24:12)? This signifies that a holy soul is divinized by ascending not to the air or to the ether or to heaven (which is) higher than all but to (a region) above the

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23 Marcus notes: “Arm. astouacanal usu. renders ἱεροφάντης, a word that seems not to occur elsewhere in Philo. Perhaps the original here was ἱεροφασία.” (Colson et al. 1929-62, suppl. 2, 82, n. n)
heavens. And beyond the world there is no place but God. And He determines the stability of the removal by saying “be there,” (thus) demonstrating the placelessness and the unchanging habitation of the divine place. (QE 2.40)

Clement’s use of the heavenly ascent theme can be illustrated from his tabernacle exegesis in Miscellanies 5.32-40, which, according to van den Hoek, reflects two complementary themes: “the incarnation of Christ and the rise of the Gnostic to the higher regions” (1988, 146). For Clement, as for Philo, the holy of holies represents the κόσμος νοητός (Strom. 5.34.7; cf. QE 2.94). He gives three different, though not incompatible, interpretations to the ark within it. It might be “the eighth region (ὀγδοάς) and the world of thought”, or “God, all-embracing, and without shape, and invisible” or “the repose which dwells with the adoring spirits” (Strom. 5.36.3; Wilson 1869, 242). His interpretations of the cherubim seem more confused. In Miscellanies 5.35.6-7 he relates them to the constellations of the two Bears, saying, “both together have twelve wings” and by zodiac and by time, which moves on it, point to the world of sense” (van den Hoek 1988, 130). In the next paragraph, however, they are identified with the noetic realm:

But the face is a symbol of the rational soul, and the wings are the lofty ministers and energies of powers right and left; and the voice is delightful glory in ceaseless contemplation. (Strom. 5.36.4; Wilson 1869, 242-3)

Clement, like Philo, connects the ‘physical’ heaven of the constellations with the ‘spiritual’ heaven of the noetic realm. (By Gregory, this link with cosmology has completely disappeared.) Much of the emphasis in his tabernacle interpretation, however, is not on the significance of the furniture, but on who is allowed where. He describes the outer covering as “a barrier against popular unbelief” (Strom. 5.33.3; van den Hoek 1988, 122). This covering was stretched over five pillars, which Clement sees as symbolic of the five senses; and the crowd “adheres to the things of sense” (Strom. 5.33.4; van den Hoek 1988, 124). Priests were allowed to enter the intermediate space between the covering and the veil. The high priest alone was permitted behind the veil. Clement ends his tabernacle interpretation by describing the high priest as gnostic (γνωστικός). This spiritual and perfect man receives his ineffable inheritance, and is replenished with insatiable contemplation face to face (Strom. 5.40.1). §27 of Excerpts from Theodotus elaborates further on the entry of the high priest into the holy of holies as the ascent of the gnostic soul to the highest level of the celestial hierarchy. Whatever the

\footnote{Note the influence of the seraphim (Isaiah 6).}
relationship between the two passages, they illustrate how the theme of heavenly ascension can be mapped onto the entry of the high priest into the holy of holies.

Irenaeus provides evidence that the Valentinians envisaged the divine world as a complex structure resembling a series of temple rooms, with the ‘Pleroma’ (Fullness) as the holy of holies.²⁵ According to the Valentinian myth which he relates, in the Pleroma is the invisible and incomprehensible First-Father, who is responsible for a series of emanations, or Aeons. The last of these Aeons, Sophia, produces a crisis in the Godhead by wishing to comprehend the greatness of the First-Father. Although Sophia is enabled to stay within the Pleroma, the crisis results in the formation of a Lower Sophia, named Achamoth, who is excluded from the Pleroma. Achamoth goes on to create the Demiurge, who resides one stage lower:

(He says that the Valentinians divided people into three classes – spiritual (πνευματικόν), ensouled (ψυχικόν), and earthly (χοικόν) (Haer. 1.7.5; Rousseau & Doutreleau 1979, 2.110). For the ensouled, salvation consists of reaching the intermediate region, whereas the spiritual are destined for the Pleroma (Haer. 1.7.1). In Excerpts from Theodotus, by contrast, the psychics first join the pneumatics in the Ogdoad, “then comes the marriage feast, common to all who are saved, until all are equal and know each other. Henceforth the spiritual elements²⁶ having put off their souls, together with the Mother … pass into the bride chamber within the Limit and attain to the vision of the Father…” (63.2; Casey 1934, 83).

Ascent is an important theme for Origen. His controversial doctrine of apokatastasis involved a return of all things to the Father through Christ, based on Paul’s words that in the end God will be “all in all” (πάντα ἐν πάσιν) (1 Cor 15:28). McGinn writes,

²⁵ Although, as Pagels (1974) cautions, Irenaeus has a polemical purpose, and cannot therefore be taken as a wholly reliable witness.

²⁶ Pagels argues that “the πνευματικά can only be the pneumatic seed … of both those who previously were psychics and pneumatics” (1974, 46). This is contra Casey, for whom the marriage feasts represents a stage in which the psychics and pneumatics are together, but after which the pneumatics advance into the Pleroma, leaving the psychics in the Ogdoad (1934, 152 n.2).
The central metaphor Origen uses for this process of return is that of a journey upward, an ascension— the notion that may well be taken as the main motif of his mysticism. This mode of presenting the life of the spirit, of course, is one common to many religious traditions, and there can be no doubt that Origen’s adaptation of it was dependent on a generalized Platonic worldview; but his *theologia ascendens* (to use von Balthasar’s phrase) departs from Platonism both in its Christocentrism and in its biblical foundation. The whole message of scripture is the descent and ascent of the Incarnate Word to rescue the fallen intellects. Thus, the history of Israel and the other nations recounted in the Old Testament is to be read as an account of the fall and rise of souls. The New Testament recounts the Word’s descent and ascent more directly, though still mysteriously. … Though it would be incorrect to ascribe the popularity of the ascent motif in Christian mysticism to Origen alone, there can be no doubt that his emphasis on itinerary had great influence on many later mystics. (1991, 115-6)

Macleod agrees that “Origen’s mysticism is intimately connected with his central activity as an exegete” (1971, 369). He quotes from the *Fragment on 1 Thessalonians*, in which Origen comments on 1 Thessalonians 4:17:

> But we must examine more closely how these who are “caught up in the clouds” go “to meet the Lord”. We know that the clouds are the prophets … and since God set in the church first the apostles and then the prophets, the clouds must be understood not only as the prophets but also the apostles. So if anyone is caught up to Christ, he ascends above the clouds of the law and the gospel, above the prophets and apostles: and taking the wings of a dove, and raised by their doctrine to the heights, he meets (Christ) not below but in the air and the spiritual understanding of the Scriptures. (PG 14.1302C; Macleod 1971, 370)

Elsewhere Origen says,

> I return to the wide open fields of the Holy Scripture: I would seek the spiritual meaning of the word of God, and in it no narrowness of distress will confine me. I shall ride through the most spacious places of the mystical and spiritual understanding. (Comm. Rom. 7.11.3; Scheck 2002, 97)

The process of exegesis has become an ascent.

### 4.1.3 Theological context

One of the tasks of this study is to identify the ways in which Gregory has to reshape the heavenly ascent paradigm in the light of the theological context of the fourth century. This will be drawn out particularly by comparison with his Alexandrian predecessors. Three themes in particular of Gregory’s theology bear upon his shaping of ascent traditions: the unknowability of God; the ontological gap between Creator and creation; and the goodness of creation. His apophaticism will be considered in the next section, on darkness, and again in section 4.5, on the names of God. In both cases the dispute with Eunomius is key. The gap between Creator and creation, and the way in which Gregory superimposes it upon the Platonic division between the sensible and noetic worlds, will be discussed in section 4.3, on the tabernacle not made with hands.
Gregory’s evaluation of the relationship between created lives and the heavenly world will emerge in sections 4.7 - 4.10 on the earthly tabernacle and the priestly vestments. Unlike Clement and the Valentinians, he does not end his interpretation of the tabernacle with an entry into the heavenly holy of holies. He takes his cue from the Exodus narrative, and turns from the heavenly to the earthly tabernacle. For as he makes clear in *To Theophilus, Against the Apollinarians*, most people cannot ascend to the heavenly heights, and instead receive their knowledge of God through the incarnation:

> If everyone had the ability to come, as Moses did, inside the cloud, where Moses saw what may not be seen, or to be raised above three heavens as Paul was and to be instructed in Paradise about ineffable things that lie above reason, or to be taken up in fire to the ethereal region, as zealous Elijah was, and not to be weighed down by the body’s baggage, or to see on the throne of glory, as Ezekiel and Isaiah did, the one who is raised above the Cherubim and glorified by the Seraphim – then surely if all were like this, there would be no need for the appearance of our God in flesh. (GNO 3.1.123-4; Anderson 2009, 187)

The earthly tabernacle also represents the church. Gregory’s interpretation encourages the believer to join the earthly tabernacle of the church, and put on the vestments of a life of virtue. This is not an ascent towards a disembodied intellectual contemplation of God: the vision of the heavenly tabernacle leads back to a virtuous life within the human believing community.

4.1.4 Heavenly ascent context

The heavenly ascent texts with which Gregory’s writing will be compared can be divided into three types. Firstly, there are the ascent apocalypses: *1 Enoch, 2 Enoch, Testament of Levi*, and *Ascension of Isaiah*, which are pseudonymous accounts of the heavenly journeys of biblical heroes. The descriptions of what was seen in heaven draw on biblical texts, such as Exodus 25-28, Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1; but the journeys are not in themselves biblical. These texts are not straightforward exegesis, but a writing back into the biblical period of new narratives, which encapsulate new understandings of the relationship between the divine and the human. As Himmelfarb points out, “The vision of *1 Enoch* 14 marks a crucial departure in the history of ancient Jewish literature”. There is a “central difference between Enoch’s vision and the visions of the prophets, including Ezekiel’s: unlike any of the prophets, Enoch ascends to heaven” (1993a, 9).

Secondly, there are texts which contain liturgical or theurgic material: *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* and the later Hekhalot texts. It may have been believed that those who recited them experienced the journey for themselves. As Alexander writes,

> The fundamental difference between (Sabbath) Songs and apocalyptic is that Songs *performs* (the) vision: it is not merely literary description; it is liturgy – a feature...
which binds Sabbath Songs tightly to the later Heikhalot tradition, with its evident stress on theurgy and mystical ascent. (2006a, 128)

Thirdly, there is the rabbinic material from Tractate Hagigah (11b – 16a) of the Babylonian Talmud. This displays a profound ambivalence to apocalyptic and theurgic heavenly ascent traditions. 3 Enoch spans the three categories. It “belongs to the late phase of the Hekhalot literature”, but also “reveals strong affinities to apocalyptic and classical rabbinic traditions” (Schäfer 2009, 315-6).

Roughly speaking – qualifications will need to be added later – the climax of both apocalyptic and theurgic texts is a vision of the divine Glory on the merkavah throne. Scholem writes,

(The essence of the earliest Jewish mysticism) is not absorbed contemplation of God’s true nature, but perception of His appearance on the throne, as described by Ezekiel, and cognition of the mysteries of the celestial throne-world. (1961, 44)

From 1 Enoch to the Hekhalot literature, the ascent through the layers of heaven “is depicted as a journey through increasingly holy rooms of the Temple to the holiest of the chambers, the devir or Holy of Holies, where the manifestation of God is enthroned on his merkavah or chariot” (DeConick 1999, 311). In Testament of Levi, for example, the angel tells Levi that “in the highest (heaven) of all dwells the Great Glory in the holy of holies far beyond all holiness” (3:4; Hollander & de Jonge 1985, 136). In mapping heavenly ascent onto the temple plan, Clement and the Valentinians were drawing “from a deep reservoir of imagery” (DeConick 1999, 310).

Tractate b. Hagigah 11b – 16a discusses the ‘work of creation’ (מעשי בראשית) and the ‘work of the chariot’ (מעשי מרכבה), both of which have restrictions placed upon them by m. Hagigah 2:1. Schäfer analyses the Bavli’s discussions of the ‘work of creation’ in terms of the rabbinic appropriation of apocalyptic cosmology. He concludes,

The Talmudic Sugya on ma’ase bereshit can be read as a polemic against the ascent apocalypses and Merkava mysticism. It adopts some major components of this literature but neutralizes and marginalizes them ... what is important is God's perpetual love for Israel, and for Israel alone, and Israel's proper response. (2005, 56)

Similar conclusions can be reached as regards the ‘(work of the) chariot’. There has been much debate about the meaning of this phrase: does it refer to a mystical practice or a tradition of exegesis? M. Hagigah forbids ‘expounding’ (דרש) the chariot; and in the stories that follow in b. Hagigah there is talk of transmitting (מסר), instructing (גマー),
studying (תת), reading (קרת), teaching (למד, שמע), beginning an exposition (פתיחה), and discoursing (רואש). This is the vocabulary of the quintessential rabbinic activity of producing midrash. This ‘rabbinisation’ can also be seen in the fact that the exposition of ma’aseh merkavah is traced back to Johanan b. Zakkai and his disciples, giving it an impeccable rabbinic pedigree (b. Ḥag. 14b). In the stories about Johanan b. Zakkaï’s disciples expounding the ‘work of the chariot’, heavenly approval is signaled by miraculous phenomena: fire coming down from heaven, a rainbow appearing in the cloud, ministering angels assembling. Many of these phenomena duplicate those of the revelation at Sinai, as described in Exodus 19, Psalm 68 and associated rabbinic legends.27 “The supernatural expertise of R. Johanan and his disciples may have been believed to show that they, and through them the rabbis, had inherited the mantle of Moses” (Halperin 1980, 138). Schäfer insists that the rabbis “understood the respective biblical texts (Genesis 1 and Ezekiel 1) as material for exegetical exercises and not for ecstatic experiences that aim at an ascent to the Merkavah in heaven” (2009, 31).28 But the stories of miraculous phenomena seem to indicate that, at its highest, exegesis could turn into an ecstatic experience, dissolving the boundaries between heaven and earth. As Wolfson writes,

As a result of their exegetical activity (Yoḥanan ben Zakkai and his disciples) experienced paranormal states of religious inspiration frequently involving the phenomenon of fire. Even though the experiences related in the rabbinic sources typically do not involve a heavenly journey or consequent vision of the enthroned glory, the fact that the exposition of the biblical text occasions a mystical state is significant. (1994b, 122)

Rabbinic midrash is very different to Origen’s allegorical exegesis; but, for the rabbis too, exegesis can become an ascent in itself. Alongside their positive reception of merkavah traditions, however, come dire warnings of its dangers. The restriction of m. Ḥag. 2:1 is reinforced in the Bavli by a number of cautionary tales warning of the dangers of ma’aseh merkavah. Twice (once in Aramaic, once in Hebrew) it tells of a child who studied the reference in Ezekiel 1:27 to hashmal, and “fire came forth from hašmal and burned him up” (b. Ḥag 13a; Halperin 1980, 155-6). Ben ‘Azzai, Ben Zoma and Aḥer come to sticky ends (b. Ḥag. 14b). The overall impression given of the ‘work of the chariot’ is “of something mysterious and wonderful, but terrifyingly dangerous and forbidden” (Morray-Jones 1993a, 183).

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27 For details, see Halperin (1980, 128-133).

28 He does concede that in the Bavli, unlike the Mishnah, Tosephta and Yerushalmi, there may be a “slow and still rudimentary infiltration of a tradition that identifies the Merkavah exegesis with an ascent to the Merkavah” (Schäfer 2009, 194; cf. Halperin 1988b, 37).
One of the issues to be faced in the comparison between Life of Moses and heavenly ascent texts is the tension between propositional statements and the use of imagery. Gregory makes vivid and creative use of biblical narrative and imagery. Canévet comments on “la difficulté que l’on éprouve à donner un sens philosophique à des images plus poétiques que rigoureuses” (1972, 443). It is Gregory’s use of imagery which makes the writing captivating for the reader. Macleod comments that if “mystical imagery – the language of ecstasy, vision or union … is vividly enough employed, the reader naturally feels an experience is being communicated to him, because to create such a feeling is a characteristic of good writing” (1971, 362). But Gregory can also use propositional statements. He works within a Platonic philosophical framework, which deals in logic and argument. He often provides interpretations to his images. As well as describing the beauties of the heavenly tabernacle, he tells us that it symbolises Christ. The heavenly ascent texts do not make use of abstract philosophical terms. They present their ideas solely through vivid, not to say lurid or bizarre, imagery. The challenge is to interpret that imagery, and decide whether they are wrestling with some of the same questions as Gregory.

4.1.5 Conclusions

In his account of Moses’ ascent of Mount Sinai to view the heavenly tabernacle, Gregory of Nyssa is working with the structure and language of heavenly ascent. Traditions of heavenly ascent were widespread within Hellenistic and Late Antique cultures; but they were flexible, and could be shaped in a variety of ways. From his Alexandrian predecessors Gregory inherited a tradition of heavenly ascent which combined Platonic notions with biblical narratives. Philo allegorised the lives of biblical characters, so that they represented the soul’s search for God. Clement and the Valentinians portrayed the rise of the spiritual gnostic to insatiable contemplation in terms of an entry into the holy of holies. Origen made the process of scriptural interpretation an ascent in itself. Their legacies can be seen in Gregory’s work. He did not, however, take them over uncritically. The theological context of the fourth century made some of these earlier formulations problematic.

The reconciliation of heavenly ascent with the biblical text can also be seen in apocalyptic material. There the means of reconciliation is not allegory, but the production of new ‘adventures’ for established biblical heroes, often using enigmatic phrases in the biblical text as starting points. We also have Jewish texts which seem to
contain liturgical or theurgic material, celebrating the ascent to heaven in poetic language. Not all Jewish texts, however, are unambiguously positive about the possibilities of ascending to heaven. Despite construing the ‘work of the chariot’ as rabbinic exegetical activity, tractate b. Hagigah 11b – 16a displays a profound ambivalence towards it, and is anxious to stress its dangers. These texts differ in genre from Life of Moses, they do not use allegory, or philosophical statements; but a little probing will show that they are often facing some of the same questions: questions about human access to the divine.
4.2 Darkness

What does it mean that Moses entered the darkness and then saw God in it? What is now recounted seems somehow to be contradictory to the first theophany, for then the Divine was beheld in light but now he is seen in darkness. (*Vit. Moys.* 2.162)

4.2.1 *Life of Moses* 2.162-169 and its biblical context

According to Exodus, three days after the people of Israel had arrived at Mount Sinai, “the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly” (19:18). A trumpet was heard, growing louder and louder. Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. Before and after this, Moses ascended and descended Mount Sinai several times, at least once taking Aaron with him (19:24). The beginning of chapter 20 has God speaking the words of the ten commandments; it is unclear whether the people hear them or not (contrast 19:9 with 20:18-19). The people then “stood afar off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness (אָרְפֶל; γνώφος) where God was” (20:21). After more ordinances, chapter 24 describes the covenant ceremony, involving Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel. They see the God of Israel, under whose feet is “as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness” (24:10). The end of the chapter reads,

> Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days; and on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. And Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights. (24:15-18)

This is when Moses is shown the pattern of the tabernacle in all its detail.

Gregory simplifies the Exodus account. According to him, Moses led the men, suitably purified, to the mountain slopes (1.42). Then

> the clear light of the atmosphere was darkened so that the mountain became invisible, wrapped in a dark cloud. A fire shining out of the darkness presented a fearful sight to those who saw it. It hovered all around the sides of the mountain so that everything which one could see smouldered with the smoke from the surrounding fire. (1.43)

There was a terrible sound, “harsh and intolerable to every ear”, “like the blaring of trumpets” (1.44). It was laying down divine ordinances. The people as a whole “were incapable of enduring what was seen and heard”, and therefore requested that the Law be
mediated through Moses. “So when all went down to the foot of the mountain, Moses alone remained” (1.45). His fear dissolved and he boldly entered the darkness. There “he received the divine ordinances” (1.47), and “with his mind purified by these laws, as it were, he was led to the higher initiation, where a tabernacle was all at once shown to him by divine power” (1.49). Gregory mentions the fire, the smoke, and the trumpet-like sound, but emphasises the darkness of Exodus 20:21. In part 2 of Life of Moses he reflects on the difference between this theophany and the first one – the burning bush – when “the Divine was beheld in light” (2.162). He portrays the ascent to God as an ascent into darkness:

Religious knowledge comes at first to those who receive it as light. Therefore what is perceived to be contrary to religion is darkness, and the escape from darkness comes about when one participates in light. But as the mind progresses and, through an ever greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality, as it approaches more nearly to contemplation, it sees more clearly what of the divine nature is uncomprehended. (2.162)

In this progression, the mind must “leave behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees” (2.163). The aim is to gain access to “the invisible and the incomprehensible” (2.163). Despite quoting John 1:18 (“No one has ever seen God”), Gregory does not abandon all light and vision imagery: He still writes about ‘seeing God’ (2.162, 163, 164). But he resorts to paradox: “the seeing that consists in not seeing (τὸ ἰδεῖν ἐν τῷ μὴ ἰδεῖν)”, and “luminous darkness (λαμπρῷ γνόφῳ)” (2.163).

Gregory’s interpretations of the entry into darkness, the giving of divine ordinances, and the vision of the tabernacle are linked by the theme of divine incomprehensibility. That which is sought “transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility (τῇ ἀκαταληψίᾳ) as by a kind of darkness” (2.163). This is reinforced by the divine voice:

The divine word at the beginning forbids that the Divine be likened to any of the things known by men, since every concept which comes from some comprehensible (περιληπτικὴν) image by an approximate understanding and by guessing at the divine nature constitutes an idol of God and does not proclaim God. (2.165)

Gregory describes the darkness as an ἄδυτον, the innermost room of a temple or shrine:

(Moses) boldly approached the very darkness itself and entered the invisible things where he was no longer seen by those watching. After he entered the inner sanctuary (τὸ ἄδυτον) of the divine mystical doctrine, there, while not being seen, he was in company with the Invisible. (1.46)
He uses ἄδυτα, in the plural, to designate the tabernacle: “(Moses) slipped into the inner sanctuary (τὰ ἄδυτα) of the tabernacle not made with hands” (2.229), and ἄδυτος, the adjective, to describe the holy of holies: “The curtains divided the tabernacle into two parts: the one visible and accessible to certain of the priests and the other secret (ἀδυτόν) and inaccessible” (2.172). This holy of holies is symbolic of divine incomprehensibility, for “the truth of reality is truly a holy thing, a holy of holies, and is incomprehensible (ἄληπτόν) and inaccessible to the multitude” (2.188). Once again, we are faced with paradox. Moses “slips into the inner sanctuary of divine knowledge (ἀδυτον παραδύεται)” (2.167): he enters the unenterable. He is in the darkness, and yet he “sees (βλέπει) that tabernacle not made with hands” (2.169). Macleod undercuts the scholarly emphasis on Gregory’s apophatism by stating, “the reverse side of Gregory’s negative theology is Christian faith: in the very darkness which surrounds God we see the ‘tabernacle’, Christ” (1971, 378). It is not, however, that straightforward, for as well as contrast there is intensification: Within the ἄδυτον of the darkness is the tabernacle (τὰ ἄδυτα), within which is the ἄδυτον of the holy of holies. And within the holy of holies are the cherubim who “cover the mysteries in the ark with their wings” (2.180). There is an incomprehensibility within the tabernacle not made with hands, to which even Moses does not have access.

Gregory’s reflections on darkness start from Exodus 20:21. He also, at 2.164, quotes from Psalm 18:12 (LXX 17:12; English Bibles 18:11):

And he made darkness (ךשׁך; σκότος) his secret place (רстраива; ἀποκρυφήν) …

He uses the same verse in On the Song of Songs (GNO 6.181; Musurillo 2001, 201). In both cases, he only quotes the first clause; but the next phrase may also have been in his mind:

… around him was his canopy (ךסכת; σκηνή) …

In the Greek, the darkness around God is a σκηνή, a tabernacle. This verse, therefore, lends biblical weight to Gregory’s interplay between darkness and tabernacle.

4.2.2 Alexandrian context

Gregory’s depiction of the ascent of the soul is often contrasted with Origen’s:

Whereas for Origen the soul pursues a path of increasing light – the darkness it encounters is dissolved as it progresses further – with Gregory the soul travels deeper and deeper into darkness. (Louth 2007, 81)
The difference with Origen can be illustrated by looking at Origen’s use of Exodus 20:21 and Psalm 18:12 in Against Celsus 6.17:

It is said … that “God made darkness his hiding-place”. This is a Hebrew way of showing that the ideas of God which men understand in accordance with their merits are obscure and unknowable, since God hides Himself as if in darkness from those who cannot bear the radiance of the knowledge of Him and who cannot see Him, partly because of the defilement of the mind that is bound to a human “body of humiliation”, partly because of its restricted capacity to comprehend God. To make it clear that the experience of the knowledge of God comes to men on rare occasions, and is to be found by very few people, Moses is said in scripture to have entered into “the darkness where God was” …

Moreover, our Saviour and Lord, the Logos of God, shows the depth of the knowledge of the Father, and that, although a derived knowledge is possessed by those whose minds are illuminated by the divine Logos himself, absolute understanding and knowledge of the Father is possessed by himself alone … By participation in him who took away from the Father what is called darkness, which he made “his hiding place”, … thus revealing the Father, anyone whatever who has the capacity to know Him may do so. (Chadwick 1980, 330-331)

Origen argues that God conceals Himself from those who are unworthy, but that Christ has taken away the darkness, and unveiled the Father. As Louth comments, “the soul does not have to do with a God who is ultimately unknowable. Darkness is only a phase we pass through: it is not ultimate as in Philo, Gregory of Nyssa, or Denys the Areopagite” (2007, 70).

If Gregory has broken with Origen, it is by returning to Philo. Philo at times uses imagery of light and seeing. He repeatedly comments on Israel as “he who sees God”. And, like the heavenly ascent texts examined below, he can portray God as shielded not by darkness but by dazzling light:

… (the mind) seems to be on its way to the Great King Himself; but, amid its longing to see Him, pure and untempered rays of concentrated light stream forth like a torrent, so that by its gleams the eye of the understanding is dazzled. (Opif. 71; cf. Fug. 165)

But Exodus 20:21 is an important text for him. In On Moses 1.158, he says, (Moses) entered, we are told, into the darkness where God was, that is into the unseen, invisible, incorporeal and archetypal essence of existing things.

In On the Posterity of Cain 14-16 and On the Change of Names 7-10, however, Moses’ entry into the darkness becomes a fruitless search, and a comment on the unknowability of God:

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29 See, for example, On Abraham 57.
30 He comments on it in On the Posterity of Cain 14, On Giants 54, On the Change of Names 7, and On Moses 1.158.
When … the God-loving soul probes the question of the essence of the Existent Being, he enters on a quest of that which is beyond matter and beyond sight. And out of this quest there accrues to him a vast boon, namely to apprehend that the God of real Being is apprehensible by no one, and to see precisely this, that He is incapable of being seen. (Post. 15)

Geljon argues that “Gregory’s interpretation of the darkness as God’s incomprehensibility is Philonic”, with both of them “calling God ἄκατάληπτος and ἄόρατος” (2002, 134). Others insist on a contrast between Gregory and Philo:

Philo posits the Logos as an intermediary between the unknowable τὸ ὄν and the created world. In On the Confusion of Tongues 95-96, he uses Exodus 24:10 (LXX: “And they saw the place, there where the God of Israel stood”) to suggest that the goal of Moses’ ascent was the Logos:

It is the special mark of those who serve the Existent (τὸ ὄν) that … in their thoughts (they) ascend to the heavenly height, setting before them Moses, the nature beloved of God, to lead them on the way. For then they shall behold the place which in fact is the Word, where stands God the never changing, never swerving, and also what lies under his feet like “the work of a brick of sapphire, like the form of the firmament of the heaven”, even the world of our senses, which he indicates in this mystery.

Origen develops this understanding in a Christian direction, by making Christ the one who dispels the darkness around the Father. For Gregory, Christ is not an intermediary, but fully divine, and therefore as incomprehensible as the Father, hence the metaphysical gulf referred to by Williams. The contrast between Gregory and Philo, however, is not as great as Meredith implies. Philo does not use ‘seeing’ simply to refer to sensual perception, but as a metaphor for noetic comprehension.

Clement refers to Ex 20:21 in Miscellanies 2.6.1, where he quotes from On the Posterity of Cain 14:

Whence Moses, convinced that God is never to be known by human wisdom, says: ‘Show yourself to me’ and he is pressed to enter into the darkness, where God’s voice was, that is into the inaccessible (ἀδύτους) and invisible conceptions of the
Existent. For God is not in darkness or in space but above both space and time and peculiarities of created things. (van den Hoek 1988, 149)

This enables Geljon to say “that Clement explains the darkness in the same way as Philo does” (2002, 131). Lilla agrees that “Clement follows Philo” in the interpretation of Ex 20:21 (1971, 217). However, Clement alludes to On the Posterity of Cain 14-16 again in Miscellanies 5.71.5:

Moses says ‘reveal yourself to me’ (Ex. 33:13), hinting most plainly that God cannot be taught, or spoken by human beings, but is knowable only through the power that proceeds from him. For the quest is formless and unseen, but the grace of his knowledge comes from him through the Son. (Runia 2004, 266-7)

Méhat comments,

Au dernier terme, Clément ne peut accepter que Dieu soit inconnaissable. Si parfois il semble reprendre la thèse philonienne que Dieu ne peut être connu que par ses manifestations et dans sa puissance, au fond, guidé par l’espérance, qu’il tient de saint Paul, de la vision « face à face », il retourne les expressions de Philon. Jouant sur les mots, il croit plutôt que Dieu ne peut être connu que par sa puissance, par un effet de sa grâce et la médiation du Logos. (1966, 203)

Runia agrees:

Clement agrees with Philo that God cannot be known as he really is. ... But when Moses asks that God reveal himself, the answer is not negative, as it is by implication in Philo. God is knowable, but only through his power, which Clement does not connect with divine forces in the cosmos, but with the knowledge that comes through the Son. God is unknowable, yet he is made known by grace and in Christ. (2004, 267)

Geljon (2002, 131, 134) points out that Clement took over Philo’s exegesis of the darkness, and therefore that Gregory might have been influenced by Clement rather than Philo. Studies such as Geljon’s have shown, however, that Gregory read Philo, whereas there is no comparable data on Gregory and Clement (Kovacs 2000, 323 n.40). It seems more likely that Gregory took the interpretation direct from Philo, especially as he shows none of Clement’s ambivalence towards apophaticism.

4.2.3 Theological context

The darkness surrounding God is a biblical theme. As McGinn notes,

The mysticism of darkness is not found among pagan Neoplatonists. Indeed, we may even surmise that this distinctively biblical apophaticism serves as a critique of late antique pagan theology with its heavy use of light imagery. (1991, 175)

All the Alexandrian writers, including Origen, commented on Exodus 20:21; Gregory was adhering “with singular fidelity to an inherited exegetical tradition” (Laird 2004, 200). He was living, however, within a new theological context. What exactly, therefore, did darkness symbolise for him?
Daniélou insists that Gregory gives new meaning to ‘darkness’:

Chez Grégoire de Nysse, en particulier dans ses derniers ouvrages, la Vie de Moïse et les Homélies sur le Cantique des Cantiques, la ténèbre prend un sens nouveau, proprement mystique. Elle exprime le fait que, même pour l’esprit éclairé par la grâce, l’essence divine reste inaccessible et que l’expérience de cette inaccessibilité constitue la forme la plus élevée de la contemplation. C’est l’originalité de Grégoire d’avoir exprimé ce caractère de l’expérience mystique à ses plus hauts degrés. (1953, 1873)

As Crouzel has pointed out, one explanation for the differences between Origen and Gregory is their differing polemical contexts:

Origen and Gregory of Nyssa have often been contrasted by attributing to the former a mysticism of light and to the latter a mysticism of darkness … Now it is not impossible that Origen’s mysticism of light is influenced by his polemic against the Montanist conception of trance as unconsciousness, while the mysticism of darkness favoured at Nyssa perhaps arises in part from Gregory’s reaction, following his brother Basil, against the neo-Arianism of Eunomius who maintained that the divine nature was strictly defined by the fact that the Father was unbegotten. (1989, 121)

Eunomius argues “that God is knowable – indeed, completely comprehensible because he is simple unity. … (He) concludes that this definition of God as simple unity can only be safeguarded by isolating the Supreme and Absolute One from the second and third, which came after and are therefore inferior and derivative. Thus ἀγεννησία becomes for him the essentially divine attribute which guarantees God’s simplicity and uniqueness” (Young 1983, 111). Gregory responds by insisting that God’s Being (οὐσία), “what he essentially is, eludes all attempt at comprehension and investigation” (Eun. 2.12; GNO 1.230; Hall 2007, 62). He derides Eunomius for thinking otherwise: “It is therefore futile to claim that knowledge vainly puffed up is able to know the divine Being” (Eun. 2.93; GNO 1.254; Hall 2007, 80). Although “all the words found in holy scripture to indicate God’s glory describe some feature of God”, his being itself

scripture leaves uninvestigated, as beyond the reach of mind and inexpressible in word, decreeing that it should be honoured in silence by prohibiting enquiry into the deepest things and by saying that one ought not to “utter a word in the presence of God” (Eccl 5:1). (Eun. 2.105; GNO 1.257; Hall 2007, 83)

This incomprehensibility becomes associated, in Gregory’s exegesis, with the darkness surrounding God.

At the beginning of Platonisme et théologie mystique, Daniélou quotes from Gregory’s On the Song of Songs:

Moses’ vision of God began with light; afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud. But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect, he saw God in the darkness. (Cant. 11; GNO 6.322.9-12; Musurillo 2001, 247)

and comments,
He structures Gregory’s mysticism into three stages: light/purification (καθάρσις), cloud/contemplation (θεωρία), darkness/love (ἀγάπη). He has to admit, however, that they are not an obvious feature of Life of Moses:

C’est à l’Exode que Grégoire emprunte dans le Commentaire sur le Cantique les grands symboles des trois voies. Or ce commentaire sur l’Exode, qu’est la Vie de Moïse, nous permet-il de les retrouver? Il faut reconnaître que si les grandes lignes apparaissent, nous ne sommes pas en présence de divisions à caractère bien déterminé. Ceci d’ailleurs ne sera pas pour nous étonner. Grégoire n’est pas l’homme des divisions rigides. Et sa composition, conformément à l’esthétique de son temps, ne présente aucun souci de systématisation. (1954, 22)

Gregory’s account of the tabernacle, in particular, does not fit Daniélou’s scheme. It comes after Moses’ entry into the darkness, and Gregory explicitly states that it is a further progression:

First, he leaves behind the base of the mountain and is separated from all those too weak for the ascent. Then as he rises higher in his ascent he hears the sounds of the trumpets. Thereupon, he slips into the inner sanctuary of divine knowledge. And he does not remain there, but he passes on to the tabernacle not made with hands. For truly this is the limit that someone reaches who is elevated through such ascents. (2.167)

For Daniélou, however, darkness is the final stage, and he assigns the tabernacle to the summit of the second stage, theoria (1954, 162-172). In contrast to this threefold schema, Heine insists that there is neither a set number of stages in Moses’ progress nor a set order in which things are discussed. The stages Gregory sets forth are based on the chronology of Moses’ life, and what he discusses in each stage is controlled by what the imagery of the Biblical text suggests. Each episode in Moses’ life takes us beyond the preceeding one in showing us the way of perfection in the virtuous life. Gregory never attempts to impose any systematic order on the progression of the Biblical story. (1975, 107-8)

Laird too emphasises the exegetical character of Gregory’s work, insisting that he does not introduce the theme of divine darkness “apart from scriptural texts which lend themselves to such an interpretation” (2004, 180).

There is a sharp divide between those commentators who think that Gregory simply uses darkness as a code for divine incomprehensibility, and those who argue that it symbolises something more. The first group can be represented by Heine:

Gregory’s statements about seeing God in the darkness do not point to an intuitive knowledge of God … but only to a recognition that God’s essence is beyond comprehension. (1975, 110)

and the second by Daniélou:
God, as He is in Himself, is Darkness for the intellect, but can be grasped by faith. In this way it is clear that the knowledge of God in the darkness is not merely negative. It is truly an experience of the presence of God as He is in Himself, in such wise that this awareness is completely blinding for the mind, and all the more so, the closer it is to Him. (2001, 32)

This time, Laird agrees with Daniélou:

Gregorian darkness … is much more a metaphor of presence than one of absence, a metaphor which emphasizes the mind’s capacity for union (supranoetic) with God, who is most intimately present, and yet who is not grasped by the mind in comprehension (grasped rather by faith). … Gregorian darkness is a metaphor of union and presence. (2004, 198-9)

The way in which Mount Sinai’s darkness in Life of Moses is interpreted partly depends on whether it is viewed through the lens of Against Eunomius or the lens of On the Song of Songs. Heine compares a number of passages in Life of Moses, including 2.163, with passages in Against Eunomius “to show how the doctrine about knowledge of God in the De vita Moysis echoes the central concepts and concerns of the debate about the essence of God between Gregory and Eunomius” (1975, 150). Laird and Harrison, on the other hand, pick up on the passage from On the Song of Songs in which the Bridegroom gives to the soul a “sense of presence (ἀίσθησιν ... τῆς παρουσίας)” (Cant. 11; GNO 6.324.10-11; Laird 2004, 199; Harrison 1992b, 77). It is therefore not surprising that Heine concludes that Life of Moses 2.163 “parallels in all its essential points the ‘orthodox’ statement about God which Gregory intended as a sharp contrast to the Eunomian view” (1975, 157), whereas Harrison, like Laird, agrees with Daniélou that the seeing which consists in not seeing denotes “a profound kind of mystical awareness” (1992b, 77).

Laird points out that, in Homily 12 of On the Song of Songs (GNO 6.355.11-14), Gregory does not stop at Moses’ entry into the darkness, but adds “that Moses becomes like the sun and is unable to be approached by those who are drawing near because of the light beaming from his face (cf. Exod. 34: 29-30)” (2004, 204). He comments,

Moses enters the darkness where God is but becomes luminous; he moves ever deeper in unknowing but grows increasingly in light. Whether the luminous quality surrounding the Patriarch is the light of knowledge consequent upon union beyond knowledge, or whether it is the light of divinized virtue, Gregory does not say with any precision. (2004, 204)

He therefore concludes that although Gregory “is an exponent of the so-called ‘mysticism of darkness’ … he also expounds a ‘mysticism of light’” (2004, 204). In Life of Moses there is a similar interplay, not between darkness and light, but between darkness and tabernacle. As already mentioned, Macleod notes “the complex texture of Gregory's writing” (1971, 377): “in the very darkness which surrounds God we see the ‘tabernacle’, Christ” (1971, 378).
4.2.4 Heavenly ascent context

Heavenly ascent texts work primarily with imagery of light, not darkness. From biblical texts onwards, that of the divine which humans perceive is described as ‘glory’. Once the earthly tabernacle has been constructed, it becomes filled with “the glory of the Lord” (Ex 40:34). Ezekiel has a vision of “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord” (Ezek 1:28). Enoch sees “the Great Glory” (1 Enoch 14:20), as do Levi (Test. Levi 3:4) and Isaiah (Asc. Is. 9:37). 2 Enoch talks of the ‘face’ of the Lord:

I saw the view of the face of the Lord, like iron made burning hot in a fire and brought out, and it emits sparks and is incandescent. Thus even I saw the face of the Lord. But the face of the Lord is not to be talked about, it is so very marvellous and supremely awesome and supremely frightening. (2 Enoch 22:1, longer recension; Andersen 1983, 136)

Orlov argues that this “represents the divine kavod” (2006, 186). As Schäfer comments, “We do not learn much about the physical shape of God’s face, only that it looks like white-hot iron – quite a prosaic image for the brightness of God’s face” (2009, 80). The Hekhalot texts too refer to the divine panim:

Lovely countenance, adorned countenance, countenance of beauty, countenance of flame[s]

is the countenance of the Lord, the God of Israel, when he sits upon the throne of his glory.

(Hekhalot Rabbati §159; Schäfer 1992, 16)

In these later writings, ‘glory’ is also sometimes replaced by the Shekinah:

The first man and his generation dwelt at the gate of the garden of Eden so that they might gaze at the bright image of the Šekinah, or the brilliance of the Šekinah radiated from one end of the world to the other … (3 Enoch 5:3; §7; Alexander 1983, 259)

What, however, is ‘glory’? It seems to be a visible manifestation of the invisible God, which is dangerous to look at, and impossible to describe. “This manifestation has neither shape nor colour nor sound: it is aniconic; it is the dazzling void at the centre of things” (Alexander 2006b, 358). A variety of devices are used to undermine any idea that the glory reveals God. Exodus deploys cloud and fire imagery: God leads the Israelites with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (13:21-22). At Mount Sinai God comes with fire (19:18, 24:17) and “thick cloud” (עֵבָּ הָעָנָן) (19:9, cf. 24:15, 40:34). In 19:16 the cloud is described as ‘heavy’ (שְׁבֵׁעָן כַּבָּד), a word derived from the same root as ‘glory’. The function of clouds is not to reveal but to obscure; fire never stands still, cannot be captured and is highly dangerous. Ezekiel also refers to fire, in connection with the mysterious hashmal substance:
And upward from what had the appearance of his loins I saw as it were gleaming bronze (כעין חשׁמל), like the appearance of fire enclosed round about; and downward from what had the appearance of his loins I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness round about him. (Ezek 1:27)

“God’s body is of human shape, but its essence is fire” (Schäfer 2009, 47). In Daniel 7 and 1 Enoch 14 the figure on the throne is wearing a garment – once again a covering – to which some luminosity has been transferred. As Alexander remarks in regard to 1 Enoch 14,

The description of the raiment baffles visualization; it is like the glare of the sun’s orb, or of a snow-field, both of which overwhelm and ‘whiteout’ human vision. (2006b, 358 n.15)

Neither Testament of Levi nor Ascension of Isaiah attempts any description of the ‘Great Glory’. Ascension of Isaiah, which survives only in translation, contains enigmatic remarks concerning whether it can be seen or not:

And I saw the Great Glory while the eyes of my spirit were open, but I could not thereafter see … (9:37; Knibb 1985, 172)

… and all (the voices and hymns of praise) were directed to that Glorious One whose glory I could not see. (10:2; Knibb 1985, 172)

Andersen notes concerning 2 Enoch 22:1, “The state of the MSS betray the embarrassment of scribes over this attempt to describe the appearance of the Lord” (1983, 136 n.c). Orlov, however, argues that here, as elsewhere, “luminosity … represents the screen that protects the Deity from the necessity of revealing its true form” (2006, 183).

Gruenwald states that “despite the daring modes of expression one can find in (the Hekhalot) literature about the contents of the mystical experience, the possibility of a direct visual encounter with God is generally ruled out” (1980, 94). Schäfer is more nuanced, pointing out the paradoxes. A section from Hekhalot Rabbati reads:

A heavenly punishment [shall befall] you, you who descend to the Merkavah, if you do not report and say, what you have heard, and if you do not testify, what you have seen upon the countenance: countenance of majesty and might, of pride and eminence, which elevates itself, which raises itself, which rages [and] shows itself great. The countenance shows itself mighty and great Three times daily in the heights, and no man perceives and knows it, so, as is written:
Holy, holy, holy. (§169; Schäfer 1992, 17-18)

The conclusion stresses that no-one can perceive the divine countenance and yet “the yored merkavah, nonetheless, does see and ‘perceive’ it, for he is called upon to give an account of it” (Schäfer 1992, 18). Another section gives a graphic account of what happens to anyone looking at the divine garment:

> Of no creature are the eyes able to observe it,
> not the eyes [of a human being] of flesh and blood, and not the eyes of his servants.
> But one who does observe, beholds exactly and sees it, his eyeballs are seized and contorted, and his eyeballs flash and shoot forth torches of fire. And they scorch him and they burn him. … (Hekhalot Rabbati §102; Schäfer 1992, 19-20)

Schäfer concludes,

> One is well-advised not to harmonize these two texts too hastily, but rather to view the tension between the ‘ability to see’ (or ‘wanting to see’) God’s beauty on his throne and the danger that arises from this seeing as one of the fundamental statements of Hekhalot Rabbati and the Hekhalot literature as a whole … (Schäfer 1992, 20)

To see God is not impossible, but it would be unbearable. Ma’aseh Merkavah is less ambivalent, stating, at the end of a long prayer section:

> Anyone who recites this prayer with all his strength can behold the radiance of the Shekhinah, and the Shekhinah loves him. (§591; Schäfer 1992, 89)

There is, however, no description of the Shekinah. Hekhalot Zuṭarti is the only Hekhalot text to directly ask the question whether one can see God, answering it with a medley of biblical texts:

> Who is able to explain, who is able to see?
> Firstly, it is written [Exodus 33:20]: For man may not see me and live.
> And secondly, it is written [Deuteronomy 5:21-24]: That man may live though God has spoken to him.
> And thirdly, it is written [Isaiah 6:1]: I beheld my Lord seated upon a high and lofty throne. (§350; Schäfer 1992, 57-58)

It implies that Isaiah 6:1 provides the solution to the contradiction between the Exodus and Deuteronomy verses. Isaiah, representing a ‘descender to the chariot’, sees God on the throne and comes to no harm. But, as Schäfer points out,

> It is surely no mere coincidence that directly following the quotation from Isaiah, no description of God’s appearance on the throne is provided, but rather the question “and what is his name?” is posed. This entails that the name of God is the crucial revelation for the Merkavah mystic. … The “vision” of God consists, so to speak, of the communication of his names. (1992, 58)

A little further on, Rabbi Aqiva’s words are reported:
But R. [’Aqiva] said:
He is, so to say, as we are,
but he is greater than everything
and his glory consists in this,
that he is concealed from us. (*Hekhalot Zuṭarti* §352; Schäfer 1992, 58)

This theme of concealment occurs elsewhere in the Hekhalot literature, forming a
counterpoint to the suggestion that God can be seen:

What does YHWH, the God of Israel, the glorious King, do? ... The glorious King
covers his face, otherwise the heaven of ’Arabot would burst open in the middle,
because of the glorious brilliancy, beautiful brightness, lovely splendour, and
radiant praises of the appearance of the Holy One, blessed be he. (*3 Enoch* 22B:5-6; Alexander 1983, 305)

The covering takes different forms. Sometimes God is concealed by the *pargod*, the
heavenly curtain equivalent to the *parokhet* in the earthly tabernacle/temple:

R. Ishmael said: Meṭaṭron said to me:
Come and I will show you the curtain (*פרגוד*) of the Omnipresent One, which is
spread before the Holy One, blessed be he ... (*3 Enoch* 45:1; §64; Alexander 1983, 296)

Sometimes it is by the divine garment, which in *Hekhalot Rabbati* is termed the *ḥaluq*:

Measure of holiness,
measure of might,
frightful measure,
terrible measure,
measure of trembling,
measure of shaking,
measure of terror,
measure of vibration,
[that emanates] from the garment (*חלוע* of ZHRRY’L,
the Lord, the God of Israel,
who comes crowned to the throne of his glory. (§102; Schäfer 1992, 19)

Wolfson suggests that the glory is hidden “precisely because it is potentially visible, that
is, inasmuch as the vision of the glory can prove fatal to any mortal, it must be hidden
from sight” (1994b, 96).

*B. Ḥagigah* 12b names and describes each of the seven heavens. For the seventh
heaven, ’Arabot, it has a long list of contents, including “the Ofannim and the Seraphim
and the holy creatures and the ministering angels and the throne of glory, (and) the King,
the living God, high and exalted” (*b. Hag.* 12b; Schäfer 2005, 47). At the climax of the
account, however, it quotes Psalm 18:12, the same verse as used by Gregory:

And darkness (*חשך*) and cloud (*ענן*) and mist (*ערפל*) surround him, as it is written:
He made darkness his hiding place, (as) his hut around him, darkness of water,
thick clouds of the sky. (*b. Hag.* 12b; Schäfer 2005, 48)

Schäfer concludes from this,
Our author, having reached the climax of his description of the seven heavens, wants to emphasize that the God who, as we (now) know, resides in the uppermost heaven, is utterly invisible, hidden as it were behind thick and impenetrable darkness. So the bottom line of his “revelation” about the seven heavens and about God’s place in the heavenly realm is that in the end we can know nothing. We only know that he is there, but he is and remains concealed; nobody can approach, let alone see him. (2005, 50)

The Talmud records a dissenting voice, aware of the biblical imagery of light associated with God:

But is there any darkness before heaven? For behold it is written: He reveals deep and hidden things, knows what is in the darkness, and light dwells with him (Dan 2:22). (b. Hag, 12b; Schäfer 2005, 48)

This contradiction is resolved by distinguishing between the outer chambers (darkness) and the inner chambers (light), assuming, presumably, that human beings cannot get through the darkness to reach the light. Another dissenting voice – R. Aḥa b. Jacob – suggests that there might be yet another heaven above the heads of the living creatures, based on Ezekiel 1:22. This, however, is silenced with a quotation from Ben Sira (3:21-22):

Do not investigate things that are too wonderful for you and do not explore what is hidden from you! Consider what you have been permitted (to consider), but the concealed things are not your concern! (b. Hag, 13a; Schäfer 2005, 48)

echoing the ending of m. Ḥagigah 2:1:

Anyone who gazes at four things, it would be merciful to him if he had not come into the world: what is above and what is below, what is before and what after.

Anyone who has no concern for the honor of his Creator, if would be merciful to him if he had not come into the world. (Halperin 1980, 12)

In the Hekhalot literature, the various coverings concealing the divine seem to be a protection from danger. It is not so much that God cannot be seen, but that to do so risks a terrible fate. B. Ḥagigah too has stories of danger, but the tone is different. Schäfer argues that the purpose of the restriction in m. Ḥagigah 2:1 is to protect God’s honour:

Improper, unbridled exegesis of Gen. 1 and Ezek. 1 (might) infringe on God’s privacy, so to speak, God’s own sovereign realm, spatially and temporally, and … such an exegesis might bring one too close to God, in any event, too close to accommodate the rabbis’ sense of decency. (2009, 185)

Despite their use of light imagery, heavenly ascent texts are more apophatic than might at first appear. Glory does not reveal God: it conceals the divine by dazzling the onlooker. Heavenly ascent texts also tend to stress the danger of attempting to perceive the divine. The appropriate human response is fear and trembling. The biblical imagery of the darkness surrounding God is picked up by the Talmud. The rabbis do not consider
it appropriate for human beings to try and approach God. Therefore they describe God as “hidden behind an impenetrable thicket of darkness” (Schäfer 2005, 56).

4.2.5 Conclusions

Darkness is a biblical theme. In Exodus 20:21, Moses draws near to the thick darkness where God is. Another important verse is Psalm 18:12 (LXX 17:12). Gregory continues the Alexandrian tradition of commenting on these verses, picking up particularly on Philo’s apophaticism. He does so in a new theological context, in which he has to counter Eunomius’ claim that the essence of God is defined by ἀγεννησία. His use of darkness symbolism, however, is nuanced and paradoxical. He talks of “luminous darkness”, and of “the seeing that consists in not seeing” (2.163). And within the darkness, Moses is vouchsafed a vision of the tabernacle.

Gregory uses darkness as a symbol of divine incomprehensibility, in line with his arguments against Eunomius. He does not, however, use it as consistently and as systematically as Daniélou suggests. He invokes its symbolism in exegetical contexts where the theme of darkness has already been introduced by the scriptural text. And darkness is not the summit of the soul’s journey. Within the darkness is a presence, symbolised in Life of Moses by the tabernacle not made with hands. This does not completely undercut his apophaticism, however, for within the heavenly tabernacle are the mysteries shielded by the wings of the cherubim, another symbol of divine incomprehensibility.

The heavenly ascent texts tend to pick up on a different biblical theme – that of glory. There is not, however, as much difference between glory and darkness as might at first appear. Daniélou says of Gregory’s ‘darkness mysticism’:

Elle est vraiment expérience de la présence de Dieu tel qu’il est en lui-même, c’est-à-dire totalement aveuglante pour l’esprit et d’autant plus aveuglante qu’elle est plus proche, si bien que l’on peut dire que c’est la ténèbre même qui exprime la présence et que c’est en devenant plus présent que Dieu devient plus ténébreux. La ténèbre est seulement une manière d’exprimer que la densité de l’existence divine est si terrible que l’homme ne peut la supporter. (1953, 1875-6)

The word ‘darkness’ could easily be replaced by ‘glory’. Whereas Gregory engages in philosophical arguments about divine incomprehensibility, the heavenly ascent texts, particularly the Hekhalot literature, use vivid, not to say lurid, imagery of consuming fire to illustrate the dangers of thinking that human beings can approach the divine. The nearest parallel to Gregory’s use of darkness imagery comes in b. Ḥagigah 12b, which
quotes Psalm 18:12 and uses it to emphasise that God is hidden from human view. Gregory denounces Eunomius’ hubris: “It is ... futile to claim that knowledge vainly puffed up is able to know the divine Being” *(Eun. 2.93; GNO 1.254; Hall 2007, 80)*. Similarly, the rabbis are “fiercely protective” of God’s privacy (Schäfer 2009, 211).
4.3 The tabernacle ‘not made with hands’

What then is that tabernacle not made with hands which was shown to Moses on the mountain and to which he was commanded to look as to an archetype so that he might reproduce in a handmade structure that marvel not made with hands? (Vit. Moys. 2.170)

4.3.1 Life of Moses 2.170-172 and its biblical context

Moses boldly approached the darkness, where he entered “the inner sanctuary of the divine mystical doctrine” (1.46). There he received the divine ordinances, and “with his mind purified by these laws, as it were, he was led to the higher initiation, where a tabernacle was all at once shown to him by divine power” (1.49). Gregory repeatedly refers to this tabernacle as “the tabernacle not made with hands (ἡ ἀχειροποίητος σκηνή)”.31 The word ἀχειροποίητος is not from the LXX: it “seems to be a New Testament coinage” (Sweet 1991, 371). In connection with a temple/tabernacle it occurs twice in the New Testament:

And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands’” (Mark 14:57-58)

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in (ἡ ἐπίγειος ἡμῶν οἰκία τοῦ σκήνους) is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands (οἰκίαν ἀχειροποίητον), eternal in the heavens. (2 Cor 5:1)32

Hebrews does not employ the alpha privative adjective, but it does envisage a “greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands (οὐ χειροποιήτου), that is, not of this creation)” (9:11).

Χειροποίητος is employed in the LXX pejoratively, to designate idolatrous buildings or objects,33 often translating בורא. This is in line with its wider use as a “standard epithet in religious discussions, Jewish, pagan, and Christian” with “pointed polemical connotations, contrasting mere human contrivances with what is not ‘made with hands,’ or is of divine origin” (Attridge 1989, 247). In the Hebrew Bible, the cosmos as a whole is sometimes contrasted with man-made buildings:

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31 2.167 twice, 169, 170, 229. The adjective also occurs alone or with another noun in 1.51; 2.168, 170, 173, 174, 245.
32 It also occurs with reference to circumcision in Colossians 2:11.
33 e.g. Lev 26:1; Is 16:12, 46:6.
Thus says the Lord: “Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house which you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?” (Isaiah 66:1)

Sometimes even the cosmos is seen as inadequate for God:

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built! (1 Kings 8:27)

Many scholars argue that there gradually evolved the notion of a ‘heavenly’ temple, ‘heaven’ being not so much the physical heavens as another dimension, either of space or time. The development of this idea of a sanctuary not made with hands can be illustrated from the exegetical afterlife of Exodus 15:17. In the MT this reads:

Thou wilt bring them in, and plant them on thy own mountain, the place (גתון), O Lord, which thou hast made for thy abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which thy hands have established.

There is here “ambivalence between temple, heaven and mountain” (Propp 1999, 563), which Propp suggests was inherited from Canaanite traditions. In the LXX the verse reads:

Lead them in, and plant them in the mountain of your inheritance, in your prepared dwelling place (ἐς ἐτοιμὸν κατοικητήριόν σου) that you made, O Lord, a holy precinct, O Lord, that your hands prepared (δ ἡτοίμασαν αἱ χεῖρές σου).

As Horbury comments, “The LXX translation ‘ready dwelling’ in Exod. 15.17 suggests that this verse was already taken to promise a pre-existent God-given temple in the third century BCE” (1996, 210). The “notion of a pre-existent divinely prepared heavenly temple” also “pervades the LXX versions of Solomon’s temple prayer” (Horbury 2001, 660):

... then you shall listen from heaven from your established dwelling place (ἐξ ἐτοιμοῦ κατοικητήριον σου) ... (1 Kings 8:39 cf. 1 Kings 8:43, 49; 2 Chr 6:30, 33, 39)

Wisdom 9:8 picks up on this divinely prepared sanctuary and, presumably with Exodus 25-27 in mind, suggests that the earthly temple was a copy of it:

You said that I should build a shrine on your holy mountain, an altar in the city of your encamping, a copy of the holy tent that you prepared beforehand from the beginning (μίμημα σκηνῆς ἠγίας ἡν προητοίμασας ἁπ’ ἀρχῆς).

It is not only in Greek sources, however, that Exodus 15:17 was interpreted in this way. 4Q174 (4QFlorilegium) uses it in an interpretation of 2 Sam 7:10-11a (“And I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in their own place, and be disturbed no more ... ”), which it says refers to:

the house which [he will establish] for [him] in the last days, as is written in the book of [Moses: «The temple of YHWH your hands will est[a]blish. YHWH shall reign for ever and ever». (4Q174 1 i 21, 2 2-3; Martínez & Tigchelaar 1997-1998, 1.353)

Exodus 15:17 is taken to refer to “an eschatological temple to be built by God himself at the End of Days” (Dimant 1986, 173). The Mekilta35 plays on the word מְכֻוָּן (fixed or established place), turning it into מְכַוָּן (corresponding to), so as to bring out the correspondence between earthly and heavenly sanctuaries:

*The place for Thee to Dwell In* (مكان לשבתך). Corresponding to Thy dwelling place (مكان לשבתך). This is one of the statements to the effect that the Throne below corresponds to and is the counterpart of the Throne in heaven. And so it also says: “The Lord is in His holy Temple, the Lord, His throne is in heaven” (Ps. 11.4). And it also says: “I have surely built Thee a house of habitation, a place (מקאן, which again could be taken as מקן for Thee to dwell in for ever” (1 Kings 8.13). (Shirata 10.24-28; Lauterbach 1933, 2.78)

The history of the exegesis of Exodus 15:17 shows how a tradition developed of a temple not built by human hands but by God, which was already prepared in heaven, and which would become available to human beings at the end of time. It was to this tradition that the saying in Mark probably refers: by promising to destroy the temple and build another not made with hands, Jesus was heralding the last days. The saying could, however, be interpreted in other ways: as referring to “the temple of his body” (John 2:21), or to the community of the church. Sweet argues that in 2 Cor 5:1 Paul alludes to a saying from the Jesus tradition (he was, of course, writing before Mark’s Gospel) in order to bring “a corporate emphasis into what might seem merely individualistic” (1991, 384):

Our physical body, like the earthly Temple, is under sentence of demolition; as a dwelling it is more like a tent, a familiar metaphor for the body which also evokes the Temple as the place of God’s presence and glory, but with the suggestion of flimsiness ... On the other hand we already have a heavenly dwelling or clothing awaiting us, the Temple-community of the New Age, which is none other than the body of the risen Christ ... (1991, 383)

Hebrews picks up both on the correspondence between earthly and heavenly sanctuaries and on the idea that Jesus has ushered in a new phase of history. Now that Christ has entered “not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, ... to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (9:24) we have reached “the end of the age” (9:24) and there is no longer any need for the earthly copy. As Koester comments,

While the author of Hebrews wanted to move his readers beyond the Jewish practices associated with the tabernacle, he preserved Christianity’s continuity with

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35 One of the earliest collections of rabbinic midrash, usually dated to the third century C.E.
Israel’s heritage by portraying Christ as a priest in the heavenly tabernacle. (1989, 185)

What did Moses see in the darkness? According to Exodus 25:9, 40, he was shown a pattern/plan (תבנית; παράδειγμα (verse 9), τύπος (verse 40)) of what he was to build. תבנית/παράδειγμα also occurs four times in 1 Chronicles 28:11-19, in which David gives Solomon the plan for the temple. This passage is unique to the Chronicler, and Williamson suggests that the word תבנית “is clearly intended as an echo of the ‘pattern’ of the tabernacle and its furnishings, shown to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exod. 25.9, 40” (1991, 26). 28:19 appears to be a summarising statement by David: “All this have I been made to understand in writing by the hand of the Lord upon me, all the works of the pattern” (translation Williamson 1991, 26), which “probably implies that David wrote the plans under conscious divine inspiration” (Williamson 1991, 26). For Moses, however, the situation was different: he was shown something. תבנית/παράδειγμα could simply refer to architectural plans, or a scale model;36 but, as we have seen, Wisdom 9:8 assumes that the ‘pattern’ he saw was the heavenly sanctuary itself, an assumption which seems to have become widespread. It is found, for example, in Hebrews:

They serve a copy and shadow (ὑποδείγματι καὶ σκιᾷ) of the heavenly sanctuary (τῶν ἐπουρανίων); for when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, “See that you make everything according to the pattern (κατὰ τὸν τύπον) which was shown to you on the mountain”. (8:5)

For Jewish sources, Solomon’s temple was the successor to the tabernacle, both being copies of the heavenly sanctuary. Williamson suggests that, according to the Chronicler, “since there was so much in common between the basic plan of the tabernacle and the temple, and since they stood in continuous tradition with each other, David did not need to see the heavenly pattern afresh: he could visit it at Gibeon” (1991, 26). Not everyone was happy with the leadership of the second temple, and some of the holiest artefacts from the first temple, such as the ark, were no longer available; but the same ideal, of the earthly sanctuary mirroring the heavenly one, remained. It would make no sense therefore to ask whether the heavenly sanctuary was a tabernacle or a temple. Some Christian polemic, however, distinguished between the tabernacle and the temple, notably Stephen’s speech in Acts:

36 “In my opinion, the plain meaning of the verses referring to Moses’ revelation is that he was shown an exact model of the Tabernacle which he was to make. If so, he was not shown the divine heavenly dwelling.” (Hurowitz 1992, 168)
Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, even as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern (κατὰ τὸν τύπον) that he had seen. Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations which God thrust out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, who found favour in the sight of God and asked leave to find a habitation for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands (ἐν χειροποιήτοις); as the prophet says, Heaven is my throne, and earth my footstool.

What house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest?

Did not my hand make all these things? (Acts 7:44-49)

This argues that the Jerusalem temple was “made with hands”, whereas it views the desert tabernacle more positively. There has been much discussion of why Hebrews does not mention the temple (which may or may not have been standing when the epistle was written) but consistently refers to the earthly place of worship as the tabernacle. This too may have been a Christian attempt to draw on Israel’s traditions whilst ignoring its current institutions. Gregory, of course, is commenting on Exodus, so he naturally talks of the tabernacle, although he does refer to it as a ναός (sanctuary/temple).

Where does Gregory think that Moses went, and what does he think he saw? He tells us that on Mount Sinai Moses participated in “eternal life”, and “lived in a state beyond nature”, with “no need of food” (1.58). The tabernacle “was all at once shown to him by divine power” (1.49). Gregory also refers to “the marvels (θαυμάτων) ... shown to him in the theophany” (1.56) and to “that marvel (θαῦμα) not made with hands” (2.170). He lovingly describes the pillars and draperies, the ark and the candlestick (1.49-50, 2.170-72). The impression is of a colourful, gleaming vision. Gregory calls it the tabernacle above (ἡ ἄνω σκηνή, 2.184, 312), but nowhere does he refer to it as the dwelling of God. He does, however, talk of Moses being “enclosed by the heavenly tabernacle” (2.312). It is certainly more than simply the blueprint (ὑπόδειγμα, 1.51, 56) for the tabernacle below. The vision carries meanings, which need to be deciphered: “Of what things not made with hands are these an imitation?” (2.173). Gregory consistently associates it with ‘mystery’ (μυστήριον) (2.174, 188, 315); and once refers to it as a theophany (θεοφάνεια, 1.56). He is very clear that “the divine nature ... transcends all cognitive thought and representation (νοὴματός καὶ ύποδείγματος) and cannot be likened to anything which is known” (1.47). And yet he tentatively suggests that this tabernacle not made with hands conveys something about Christ. Moses was instructed “by a type (ἐν τύπῳ) in the mystery of the tabernacle which encompasses the universe. This

37 1.49, 50, 51, 56.
tabernacle would be Christ who is the power and wisdom of God” (2.174). His repeated use of the adjective ἀχειροποίητος – it occurs eleven times in the treatise – is part and parcel of his apophaticism. He wishes to stress not only that Moses’ vision was a divine gift, but the mysteries to which it points are not within human grasp.

4.3.2 Alexandrian context

The LXX, whose traditional associations with Egypt have been confirmed by modern scholarship, 38 translates מִשְׁנָה by παράδειγμα at Ex 25:9 and τύπος at 25:40. 39 At Exodus 26:30, where the MT uses מבנה in the sense of ‘plan’, it has εἶδος. These are key words in middle Platonist terminology. Pseudo-Justin, in Exhortation to the Greeks, 40 quotes these verses in order to prove that “(Plato) discovered the word form (τὸ τοῦ εἴδους ὄνομα) in the writings of Moses” (29.1; Marcovich 1990, 65; Falls 1948, 411). The word παράδειγμα is particularly significant, because in Timaeus 28-29 Plato used it to designate the model after which the Demiurge constructed the universe. Turning Pseudo-Justin’s argument on its head, therefore, did the translators responsible for the LXX deliberately use παράδειγμα, τύπος and εἶδος in order to give a Platonist spin to Moses’ vision? Barr thinks not:

Where LXX used παράδειγμα for tabnit the sense was that of the ‘plan’ or ‘design’ of a building, a sense well established in Greek from Herodotus (v. 62) and still used much later, and a sense which corresponded exactly to that of the Hebrew. It seems therefore unlikely that either the LXX intended, or was unconsciously influenced by, or was taken by its readers to intend, any suggestion of Platonism, merely on the ground that this word, which was used in the LXX in its straightforward sense ..., was also used by Plato in a rather transferred sense to describe the nature of the forms. (1983, 153-4)

Hayward, however, whilst agreeing that one cannot be certain that the translators intended to use παράδειγμα in its Platonic sense, argues that “the word stands out by being used only once in the entire Pentateuch, and it might certainly have invited the very first readers of LXX to see in it a Platonic sense” (2007, 397 n.26). The use of παράδειγμα at Exodus 25:9 by the LXX translators made it easy for writers in the Alexandrian tradition to interweave Biblical and Platonic imagery: the heavenly tabernacle plan became the Platonic world of ideas.

39 Philo’s LXX, however, appears to have παράδειγμα at 25:40 (cf. Leg. 3.102).
40 This is usually dated to the second half of the third century C.E. (Marcovich 1990, 3-4).
Philo talks of the whole universe as the temple of God:

The highest, and in the truest sense the holy, temple of God is ... the whole universe, having for its sanctuary the most sacred part of all existence, even heaven, for its votive ornaments the stars, for its priests the angels who are servitors to His powers ... (Spec. 1.66)

He interprets Exodus 15:17 along these lines, arguing that “the mountain of Thine inheritance” refers to the world (Plant. 48):

The world, we read, is God’s house in the realm of sense-perception, prepared and ready for Him. It is a thing wrought, not, as some have fancied, uncreate. It is a “sanctuary”, an outshining of sanctity, so to speak, a copy of the original (μίμημα ἀρχετύπου); since the objects that are beautiful to the eye of the sense are images of those in which the understanding recognizes beauty. (Plant. 50)

Elsewhere he argues that there are “two temples of God: one of them this universe ... and the other the rational soul” (Somn. 1.215). As van den Hoek comments,

Cosmology and anthropology are extensions of each other ... The human soul represents a second sanctuary after a first sanctuary, which is the universe; the second sanctuary is transformed into a microcosm in tune with the cosmic harmony. (1988, 117)

The quotation from On Planting also refers to an ‘original’, an archetype, of which the sanctuary of the world is a copy. This ties in with Philo’s description of the process of creation in On the Creation of the World:

For God, being God, assumed that a beautiful copy would never be produced apart from a beautiful pattern (καλὸν παραδείγματος), and that no object of perception would be faultless which was not made in the likeness of an original discerned only by the intellect (πρὸς ἀρχέτυπον καὶ νοητὴν ἰδέαν). So when He willed to create this visible world He first fully formed the intelligible world (τὸν νοητὸν κόσμον), in order that He might have the use of a pattern wholly God-like and incorporeal (ἀσωμάτῳ καὶ θεοειδεστάτῳ παραδείγματι) in producing the material world, as a later creation, the very image of an earlier, to embrace in itself objects of perception of as many kinds as the other contained objects of intelligence. (Opif. 16)

He is picking up on Plato’s reference to a model (παράδειγμα) for the cosmos in Timaeus 28-29; does he also have in mind the pattern of the tabernacle shown to Moses? He draws attention to the parallels between creation and the building of the tabernacle when he compares Bezalel (the craftsman who built the tabernacle, cf. Exodus 31:1-5) with the Logos:

Bezalel means, then, “in the shadow of God”; but God’s shadow is His Word, which he made use of like an instrument, and so made the world. (Leg. 3.96)

When he describes Moses’ experience on Mount Sinai, he says:

(Moses) saw with the soul’s eye the immaterial forms (ἀσωμάτους ἰδέας) of the material objects about to be made, and these forms had to be reproduced in copies perceived by the senses, taken from the original draught (ἀρχετύπου γραφῆς), so to speak, and from patterns conceived in the mind (νοητῶν παραδείγματων). ... So the
shape of the model (τύπος τοῦ παράδειγματος) was stamped upon the mind of the prophet, a secretly painted or moulded prototype, produced by immaterial and invisible forms (ἀνεύ υλης ἀοράτος εἴδεσι) ... (Mos. 2.74, 76)

The same vocabulary is used here as in On the Creation of the World 16. But what exactly is the relationship between the παράδειγμα of creation and the παράδειγμα of the tabernacle? Only in Questions on Exodus (for which we do not have the original Greek) does he imply that they are one and the same:

What is the meaning of the words, “Thou shalt make (them) according to the pattern which has been shown to thee on the mountain”? (Ex 25:40) Through the “pattern” He again indicates the incorporeal heaven, the archetype of the sense-perceptible, for it is a visible pattern and impression and measure. He testifies to these things by saying “See,” (thereby) admonishing (us) to keep the vision of the soul sleepless and ever wakeful in order to see incorporeal forms, since, if it were (merely a question of) seeing the sense-perceptible with the eyes of the body, it is clear that no (divine) command would be needed for this. (QE 82, cf. 52)

That Philo thinks of the tabernacle as constructed from the same model as the cosmos makes sense, given his cosmological interpretation of the tabernacle. He picks up on what was presumably a widespread tradition, and describes the tabernacle layout and furniture as representative of the universe, with the holy of holies as “the realm of mind (νοητά)” (Mos. 2.81).

When Philo was writing, the Jerusalem temple still stood, and it was for him a sacred building – the sacred building. By Origen’s time, it had been destroyed. Unlike some earlier Christian authors, Origen does not condemn the temple with its sacrificial laws, but considers that its time has passed. Thanks both to Hebrews and to the Johannine identification of the temple with the body of Christ (John 2:19), he associates the new era simultaneously with Jesus Christ and with the heavenly temple:

First, there was Jerusalem, that great, royal city, where the most renowned Temple had been constructed for God. But after that, one who was the true Temple of God came and said about the Temple of his body, “Destroy this Temple”; and began to open the mysteries “of the heavenly Jerusalem,” this earthly place was destroyed and the heavenly became visible, and in that Temple “stone” did not remain “upon stone” from the time when the flesh of Christ was made the true Temple of God. First there was a high priest who purified the people “by the blood of bulls and goats”; but when the true high priest who “sanctifies” believers “by his own blood,” came, that first high priest exists no more and neither was any place left for him. (Hom. Lev. 10.3; Barkley 1990, 203)

He consistently argues for the superiority of the celestial temple over the earthly one:

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41 It is also found in Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 3.181-3.
42 See, for example, the Epistle of Barnabas 16.
If therefore, O Jew, coming to the earthly city of Jerusalem, you find it overthrown and reduced to ashes and embers, do not weep as you do now “as if with the mind of a child”; do not lament; but search for a heavenly city instead of an earthly one. Look above! And there you will discover “the heavenly Jerusalem that is the mother of all.” (Hom. Josua 17.1; Bruce 2002, 158)

This then informs his exegesis. The aim of his commentary on the description of the tabernacle in Exodus 25-28 is to “ascend to heaven and there seek the magnificence of the eternal tabernacle whose form is imperfectly represented on earth by Moses”, since “things which are introduced in the divine books are said not of earthly things, but of heavenly, and are forms not of present but ‘of future goods,’ not of corporeal things, but of spiritual” (Hom. Exod. 9.2; Heine 1982, 337). Despite this statement of intent, he cannot in fact describe “the eternal tabernacle”. Instead, in the body of the sermon, he discusses the earthly copy. For him, unlike Philo, this is neither the cosmos nor the Jerusalem temple, but the church. He picks up on Philo’s macrocosm – microcosm relationship:

For if, as some before us have said, this tabernacle represents the whole world, and each individual also can contain an image of the world, why can not each one also complete a form of the tabernacle in himself? (Hom. Exod. 9.4; Heine 1982, 340-1)

He is not talking about human beings in general, however, but of the believers who make up the church.

If the heavenly paradeigma is the Platonic world of ideas, it cannot be described directly in human language. All that can be described and discussed is the earthly copy. For Philo that copy is the universe. The tabernacle/temple is a symbolic representation of the universe; and the human being is its microcosm. Philo talks of all three as sanctuaries of God. Origen too, for all his talk of ascending to the heavenly heights, can only describe the earthly copy, which for him is the church, and its microcosm, the individual believer. The nearest either of them come to describing the heavenly world is when they talk about the holy of holies and its contents. For Philo, God speaking from above the cherubim over the ark, represents the hierarchy of the Alone truly existent one, the divine Logos, the creative and kingly powers, the gracious and punitive powers (Fug. 100-1; QE 68). For Origen, the cherubim and the propitiatory represent “the science of the Trinity” (Hom. Num. 10.3.4; Comm. Rom. 3.8). We shall look at these interpretations in more detail in 4.6.2, on heavenly powers.
4.3.3 Theological context

The Alexandrian tradition worked with the Platonic notion of the κόσμος νοητός.

The aim of heavenly ascent was for the soul to return to its true home there:

The Platonic tradition … generally assumed that the intellect, when sufficiently purified, led back from the multiplicity of things to pure simplicity, would naturally ‘gravitate’ to its proper ‘home’ in the transcendent. (Williams 1979, 59)

Gregory superimposed upon this a gulf between Creator and creation:

When all that is non-rational is put aside, and the soul or intellect is naked before God, it confronts a stranger: the uncreated Lord is still and always will be on the far side of an unbridgeable gulf, and the soul will not ever be able to rest in the security of perfect union in the Platonic sense. Plato, Philo and Plotinus would all agree that the soul cannot express God in image or concept; it is Gregory who grounds this incapacity in a metaphysical gulf between God and the created self. (Williams 1979, 60)

Mosshammer shows how the idea of this ‘double antithesis’ developed over the course of Gregory’s writing, particularly as a result of his debate with Eunomius. In his early works, “a dualism between intelligible and sensible predominates” (Mosshammer 1988, 360). In his later works, however, Gregory proceeds to subdivide the intellectual nature into the uncreated maker of all being and the created nature dependent upon it. He defines the uncreated nature as being always the same, beyond distinctions of greater or less as to possession of the good. That nature which is brought into being by creation, on the other hand, is never complete, but ever creating itself, by a process of perpetual increase in participation of a superior good. Thus there can be no limit to its increase, but the present good – however complete it may seem – is always but the beginning of something more. (Mosshammer 2000, 367)

Where does the tabernacle not made with hands, “the inner sanctuary of the divine mystical doctrine” (1.46), fit into this scheme? According to Daniélou, Gregory replaces the Platonic κόσμος νοητός with the world of angels (1954, 162). This is certainly part of his tabernacle interpretation, and will be examined further in 4.6.3. But Gregory also describes Moses’ experience as a theophany (1.56). He has inherited from Origen an interpretation of the earthly tabernacle as symbolic of the body of Christ, the church (see 4.7.2). If the heavenly tabernacle is not made with hands, in other words is uncreated, if it is the model, the source, of creation, and if the earthly tabernacle, its copy, is the church, then the heavenly tabernacle must be Christ. The next section (4.4) will examine how Gregory tries to unpack and make sense of this.
4.3.4 Heavenly ascent context

As Himmelfarb has pointed out, when Enoch ascends to heaven in the Book of the Watchers “the heavenly edifices through which (he) passes to reach the divine throne are a temple” (1987, 210). And this sets a trend for subsequent heavenly ascent texts:

The Book of the Watchers was an extremely influential work, and one aspect of its influence is the picture of heaven as a temple that explains so many features of the other ascent apocalypses, whether it stands in the foreground or in the background. (Himmelfarb 1993a, 14)

1 Enoch 14 describes two ‘houses’, one leading on into the next, surrounded by a wall, corresponding to the ground-plan of the tabernacle. The ceiling of the first house is “like shooting stars and lightning flashes”, amongst which are “fiery cherubim” (14:11; Nickelsburg 2001, 257), just as cherubim decorate the walls of the tabernacle, Solomon’s temple and Ezekiel’s vision of the rebuilt temple (Ex 26:1; 1 Kings 6:29; Ezek 41:20). Inside the second house the “Great Glory” (14:20) sits upon a throne guarded by cherubim (14:18), equivalent to the cherubim over the ark in the holy of holies. The style of Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice is very different, but it too describes heaven using temple terminology. There are pillars (עמודים) and corners (פנות (4Q403 1 i 41). Song 10 describes the veil (פרוכת), and seems to allude to the figures of cherubim woven into it (cf. Ex 26:31). The phrase “works of wondrous mingled colours” (מעשי רוקמות פלא) (4Q405 14-15 i 6) echoes the “embroidered work” (מַעֲשֶׂה רֹקֵם) of the hangings at the entrances of the tabernacle and its court, and of the High Priest’s girdle (Ex 26:36, 27:16, 28:39). Other technical terms, such as דביר (inner room, e.g. 4Q403 1 ii 13, cf. 1 Kings 6:20, (lofty abode e.g. 1 Kings 8:13), גלון (vestibule e.g. 1 Kings 6:3) and מרכבה (1 Chr 28:18) come from the descriptions of Solomon’s temple in Kings and Chronicles. Newsom argues that Ezekiel’s vision of the rebuilt temple in Ezekiel 40-48 has influenced the structure of Songs 9 to 12 (1985, 53-5). Some later texts, such as Testament of Levi (in some manuscripts), the Ascension of Isaiah and b. Hagigah work with a structure of seven heavens. There has been discussion as to where this notion came from, with Yarbro Collins (1995) arguing for the influence of Babylonian magic. Fletcher-Louis, however, suggests that it relates to “the traditional separation of the temple into seven spheres of holiness” (2002, 57 n.6) as described in m. Kelim 1.8 and Josephus Jewish War 1.26. In Testament of Levi the top four heavens function as a temple. In b. Hagigah 12b there is a temple and altar in the fourth heaven.
The heavenly ascent texts work not with philosophical categories, but with vivid imagery. In the Platonic tradition, the divide between heaven and earth is the divide between noetic and sensible, with the sensible being a copy of the noetic ideal. Philo and Origen cannot describe the heavenly paradeigma, only its earthly copy and representation. Ascent texts do describe the heavenly realms; their heroes travel through them and describe what they see: God on a throne within a temple. However, as Himmelfarb acknowledges, “while it is clear that the heavenly temple of 1 Enoch 14 corresponds to the earthly temple, it does not seem to correspond in detail to any particular temple described in the Hebrew Bible” and “the heavenly temples of later apocalypses are also characterized by an absence of technical terminology and by an even more limited correspondence of detail between the earthly and the heavenly temples” (1993a, 15). She argues that “the limited correspondence of heavenly temple to earthly seems to reflect the belief that the heavenly temple so transcends the earthly that the correspondence cannot be exact” (1993a, 16). The paradoxical imagery makes it clear that the heavenly temple is ‘not made with hands’. In 1 Enoch 14 the outer wall is built of hailstones surrounded by tongues of fire (14:9). The second house is “greater than the former one” (14:15), and yet is it contained within it? “Heaven is a totally paradoxical, topsy-turvy world where the terrestrial laws of nature do not apply” (Alexander 2011, 173). In Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice there is an inconsistent use of singulars and plurals. Sometimes there is one merkavah (4Q405 20-22 ii 8), sometimes several markavot (4Q405 20-22 ii 3). They are also plural sanctuaries (מקדשים e.g. 4Q404 5 5), temples (היכל e.g. 4Q400 1 i 13), vestibules (אולמי e.g. 4Q405 14-15 i 4), inner rooms (דבירי e.g. 4Q405 14-15 i 7), veils (פרכות e.g. 4Q405 15-16 ii 5), firmaments (רקיעי e.g. 4Q405 23 i 7), and thrones (כסאי e.g. 4Q405 23 i 3), existing alongside singular forms. Sometimes a sevenfold plurality is specified, as in seven exalted holy places (לשבעת קודשי רום 4Q403 1 ii 11), or seven inner rooms of priesthoods (שבעת דבירי כהונות 4Q405 7 7 as restored); but not always. This interchangeable use of singular and plural forms may have been a deliberate rhetorical device designed to disorientate the reader, making it “virtually impossible to extract a coherent and stable image of the heavenly sphere or the heavenly Temple structures that are said to inhabit it” (Boustan 2004, 210). Newsom talks of “intentional violations of ordinary syntax and meaning in a text which is attempting to communicate something of the elusive transcendence of heavenly reality” (1985, 49). Whereas in 1 Enoch the
heavenly temple seems to constructed of the primordial elements of fire and water, albeit in impossible combinations, in *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* “the architectural structures of the Temple are animated and become living and praising creatures” (Schäfer 2009, 133):

> With these let all fo[undations of …]” holies praise, the uplifting pillars of the supremely lofty abode, and all the corners of its structure. Sin[g-praise]

(Song 7 12; 4Q403 1 i 41, 4Q405 6 2; Charlesworth & Newsom 1999, 163)

This is not a ‘material’, but a ‘spiritual’ temple, composed of living angelic beings. In the later Hekhalot texts “there seems to be an implication that the seven concentric palaces grow progressively larger as one moves inwards” (Alexander 2011, 176). There are dire warnings about how dangerous the heavenly realms are for human beings, who survive only if they themselves are transformed. Ascending on high involves being able “to walk in rivers of fire” (*Hekhalot Zuṭarti* §349; Rowland & Morray-Jones 2009, 278).

4.3.5 **Conclusions**

The Alexandrian tradition and heavenly ascent texts both refer to a world beyond this one, a world which human language is not adequate to describe. Moses was given a glimpse of that world on Mount Sinai, and then did his best to reproduce it with the tabernacle. Therefore the writers in the Alexandrian tradition scrutinise the details of the tabernacle for clues about the heavenly realms. Ascent texts use temple imagery in their pictures of heaven, but with paradoxical twists. All are anxious to know about the world beyond this one because it is the source of creation, the fountainhead of life and power; but they are aware that heaven is “a different dimension, ... where things can happen that defy the laws operating in this world” (Alexander 2011, 170). And that is why, for Gregory, the tabernacle ‘not made with hands’ is a type of Christ.
4.4 Christological interpretation

Taking a hint from what has been said by Paul, who partially uncovered the mystery of these things, we say that Moses was earlier instructed by a type in the mystery of the tabernacle which encompasses the universe. This tabernacle would be Christ who is the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24), who in his own nature was not made with hands, yet capable of being made when it became necessary for this tabernacle to be erected among us. Thus, the same tabernacle is in a way both un-fashioned and fashioned, uncreated in pre-existence but created in having received this material composition. (Vit. Moys. 2.174)

4.4.1 Life of Moses 2.173-179 and its biblical context

“What then is that tabernacle not made with hands?” (2.170) asks Gregory. He describes the vision (2.170-172), and then returns to his question:

Of what things not made with hands are these an imitation? And what benefit does the material imitation of those things Moses saw there convey to those who look at it? (2.173)

He professes a reluctance to answer it:

It seems good to me to leave the precise meaning of these things to those who have by the Spirit the power to search the depths of God (1 Cor 2:10), to someone who may be able, as the Apostle says, in the Spirit to speak about mysterious things (1 Cor 14:2). We shall leave what we say conjecturally and by supposition on the thought at hand to the judgment of our readers. Their critical intelligence must decide whether it should be rejected or accepted. (2.173)

1 Corinthians 2:10 is used by both Origen and Gregory to justify their allegorical interpretations of scripture. Gregory, unlike Origen, “stops short of asserting that he has the spiritual understanding which Paul had” (Heine 1984, 364). Instead, he relies on Paul to back up his interpretations. One reason for his professed reluctance is that “mysterious things” (μυστήρια) are only to be spoken of by the spiritual elite. The second and third sentences of 2.173, however, carry a different tone. They suggest an awareness that he is about to say something not well established, and which may be controversial. He states that the heavenly tabernacle is a type of the pre-existent Christ, and the earthly tabernacle a type of the incarnate Christ. This, according to Daniélou, is “une vue personnelle de Grégoire, comme il le dit lui-même” (2000, 221 n.1). There are precedents for the tabernacle being interpreted as a type of the church, and for particular elements within it to be seen as symbols of Christ, but not for the heavenly tabernacle as a whole to be construed as a type of Christ. Where, therefore, did Gregory get the idea from?

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43 For details, see Heine (1984).
44 See Origen Homilies on Exodus 9.3, Homilies on Numbers 5.3; and Methodius Symposium 5.7-8.
45 See Clement Miscellanies 5.35, where the golden candlestick is designated a sign of Christ.
Christians scrutinised the Old Testament for signs of Christ. Some of the typologies used by Gregory, such as the bronze serpent erected by Moses as a type of the cross (1.67-68, 2.271-277), were established early on. Here he is producing a new one. It is natural that at a climactic point in the narrative he would wish to find Christ. He interprets the burning bush as symbolic of the incarnation, and there too he is innovative: “Gregory appears to be the first to make the bush a figure of Mary’s virginity unaffected by the birth of Jesus” (Malherbe & Ferguson 1978, 159-60 n.28). Since the tabernacle has two manifestations: a celestial and an earthly one, there is a natural correspondence with the pre-existent and the incarnate Christ. There is, however, more to Gregory’s interpretation than this. He is drawing on a number of tabernacle traditions, particularly those concerning its relationship with wisdom, and reinterpreting them for a new theological context. The result is a tightly woven complex of allusions.

Throughout this section Gregory stresses his dependence on Paul: “as the Apostle says” (2.173); “taking a hint from what has been said by Paul” (2.174); “now the great Apostle says” (2.178), “we can gain clarity … from the very words of the Apostle” (2.179). This is because Paul, like Moses, has seen the heavenly tabernacle, and therefore can be relied upon at least to give hints about its mysteries. Hebrews (which Gregory believes to have been written by Paul) says that “the curtain of the lower tabernacle is the flesh of Christ” (2.178 cf. Heb 10:20). Gregory dubs this a “partial interpretation”:

It would be well then by paying heed to the partial interpretation, to fit the total contemplation of the tabernacle to it. (2.178)

For the “total contemplation”, in which not only the curtain, but the whole tabernacle is related to Christ, he turns to two other Pauline texts. The first, quoted at the beginning of his interpretation, is 1 Corinthians 1:24, the other is Colossians 1:15-20. To these he adds John 1:14 and allusions to Proverbs 8:22. The net result is to link Christ and the tabernacle, via wisdom, in three different ways: a) as present on earth, b) as the agent/pattern of creation, and c) as the dwelling of God. The parallels he implies are best shown in tabular form. The entries in bold are statements made by Gregory. The biblical verses will be discussed here, and the antecedents in Philo in 4.4.2.

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46 For the bronze serpent see John 3:14-15, Epistle of Barnabas 12, Justin Martyr Dialogue with Trypho 91, 94, 112, 131.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tabernacle</th>
<th>Wisdom</th>
<th>Christ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) the tabernacle was set up on earth (Ex 35-40)</td>
<td>wisdom became created (Prov 8:22) wisdom has built her house (Prov 9:1) In a holy tent I (wisdom) ministered before him (Sir 24:10) the Logos within the holy of holies (Fug 100-1, QE 68)</td>
<td>who also pitched his own tabernacle among us (2.175) and the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us (John 1:14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) paradeigma as the pattern for both the tabernacle and creation (Mos. 2.76, Opif. 16, QE 52, 82) tabernacle as a microcosm of creation (Mos. 2.81-108, QE 83-5)</td>
<td>God by wisdom founded the earth (Prov 3:19) wisdom as the agent / pattern for creation (Prov 8:22 combined with Gen 1:1) wisdom holds all things together (Wis 1:7) the paradeigma as the kosmos noētos, either identified with the Logos or placed within it (Opif. 20, 25, 36) the Logos as the instrument of creation (Leg. 3.96)</td>
<td>in him were created all things, everything visible and everything invisible ... (2.179; Col 1:16) all things were made through him (John 1:3) who encompasses everything within himself (2.177) in him all things hold together (Col 1:17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (Ex 40:34)</td>
<td>the Logos as the house of God (Migr. 4) wisdom as the palace of the All-ruler (Congr. 116) the Logos containing all God’s fullness (Sonn. 1.75)</td>
<td>in which lives the fullness of divinity (2.177; Col 1:19 / 2:9) and from his fullness have we all received (John 1:16)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a) Christ present on earth

Gregory starts by quoting 1 Cor 1:24, which establishes the reference to wisdom. He continues by talking about the tabernacle as both unfashioned and fashioned (ἄκατάσκευον / κατεσκευασμένην), uncreated and created (ἄκτιστον / κτίστην). This alludes to Proverbs 8:22: “The Lord created (ἔκτισέν) me as the beginning of his ways ...” (LXX), a verse which was exploited by the Arians:

Because this saying is uttered by Wisdom, and the Lord is called Wisdom by great Paul (1 Cor 1.24), they advance this verse as meaning that the Only-begotten God
himself, speaking as Wisdom, confesses that he was created by the Maker of all things. (Eun. 3.1.21; GNO 2.11.4-8; Hall forthcoming)\(^{47}\)

Gregory counters their arguments in Against Eunomius 1.298-305 (GNO 1.114-117), Against Eunomius 3.1.21-65 (GNO 2.10-27), and again in Refutation of the Confession of Faith of Eunomius 110-113 (GNO 2.358-360). In the Refutation he mentions translations which read ‘acquired’ (ἐκτήσατο) rather than ‘created’ (ἔκτισε),\(^{48}\) but says that he is happy to stick with “the reading which prevails in the Churches” because:

He Who for our sakes became like as we are, was in the last days truly created. - He Who in the beginning being Word and God afterwards became Flesh and Man. (GNO 2.358; NPNF 2.5.117)

According to Gregory, Proverbs 8:22 refers to the pre-existent Christ becoming incarnate. In his discussion in Against Eunomius 1 he brings together John 1:3 and Col 1:17:

(\textit{the Evangelist}) says that all things that have come to be have come to be through him and are constituted (συνεστάναι) in him. (301-302; GNO 1.115.25-116.1; Hall 1988, 79)

The same passages lie behind his statement in \textit{Life of Moses} 2.175: “For there is one thing out of all others which both existed before the ages and came into being at the end of the ages”. Malherbe and Ferguson take this as an allusion to Col 1:17 (1978, 180 n.220); but it could equally be seen as a summary of the prologue to John’s gospel. The paragraph ends with an unambiguous reference to John 1:14:

This one is the Only Begotten God, who encompasses everything in himself but who also pitched his own tabernacle among us (πηξάμενος δὲ καὶ ἐν ἡμῖν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ σκηνὴν.

Most commentators agree that both Colossians and John are reusing Jewish wisdom traditions.\(^{49}\) The idea of wisdom dwelling on earth in a tent/tabernacle can be found in Sirach 24, itself a meditation on Proverbs 8:

… he who created me put down my tent (τὴν σκηνὴν μου)

and said, 'Encamp (κατασκήνωσον) in Iakob …

… In a holy tent (ἐν σκηνῇ ἡγία) I ministered before him … (24:8-10)

In Against Eunomius 3,1, Gregory quotes Proverbs 9:1 (“Wisdom has built her house”), saying that it hints at the building of the Lord’s flesh:

\(^{47}\) For the early history of debates around Proverbs 8:22-25 see Parvis (2007), who sets out the interpretations of Arius, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Asterius the Sophist and Marcellus of Ancyra.

\(^{48}\) GNO 2.358.13-15. Gregory does not specify the “more ancient copies” he has seen; but Eusebius (\textit{Eccl. theol.} 3.2; GCS 14.142) mentions Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion, all of which use ἔκτησατο rather than ἔκτισε.

\(^{49}\) Barrett, for example, states, “Col. 1.15-20 shows as clearly as does John 1.1-18 the use of language drawn from Jewish speculations about Wisdom” (1978, 154).
It was not in someone else’s building that the true Wisdom dwelt, but she constructed for herself a dwelling from the body of the Virgin. (Eun. 3.1.44; GNO 2.19.6-8; Hall forthcoming)

He argues that Proverbs, John and the tabernacle narrative all display the same structure, talking first of the pre-existent Christ’s role in creation, and then of the incarnation. As he says with regard to Proverbs:

It is ... possible to see Solomon ... presenting the whole mystery of the Economy. He speaks earlier of the pre-temporal power and activity of Wisdom, when in a way he agrees even verbally with the Evangelist. Just as John in comprehensive language proclaims him Cause and Designer of all things, so Solomon says that every single thing in the universe was made by him (Prov 3:19) ... Having presented these and similar matters he brings in also the doctrine of the human Economy, why the Word became flesh. (Eun. 3.1.46-8; GNO 2.19-20; Hall forthcoming)

In Life of Moses he follows his interpretation of the heavenly and earthly tabernacles with an allegorisation of the priestly robes in terms of virtue. Similarly, he continues his interpretation of Proverbs by saying that the ‘mountains’, ‘hills’, ‘deeps’ and ‘earth’ of Proverbs 8:24-26 signify “the manifold gifts of the Holy Spirit” (Eun. 3.1.56; GNO 2.23; Hall forthcoming).

b) Christ as the agent/pattern of creation

Variations on the phrase “who encompasses (περιέχων) everything in himself” are repeated three times in Life of Moses 2.173-179 (174, 175, 177). This wording was used by Philo, and its theological implications will be explored below. It also alludes to Colossians 1:16, “for in him all things were created ...” (quoted by Gregory in 2.179), and John 1:3, “all things were made through him”. These New Testament reflections on Christ seem to have linked the ‘beginning’ in Proverbs 8:22 with the ‘beginning’ in Genesis 1:1, so as to make wisdom/Christ the agent of creation: through wisdom God created the heavens and the earth. Alexander argues that although Hellenistic Jewish works, such as Wisdom, Ben Sira and Philo, come close to doing so, Colossians was the first text to make this exegetical move (2009a, 23). Colossians combines this idea of Christ as the agent of creation with an image of Christ as the continuing sum and foundation of creation: “in him all things hold together” (τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν 1:17). This echoes Wisdom 1:7: “that which holds all things together (τὸ συνέχον τὰ πάντα)” Gregorv may be referring to this image of Christ as “the power which encompasses the universe (ἡ περιεκτικὴ τῶν ὄντων δύναμις)” and “the common protector of all (ἡ κοινὴ τοῦ πάντος σκέπη)” (2.177) in the context of the heavenly tabernacle
because it is the function of a tent/tabernacle to enclose and protect. He may also be aware of the Philonic tradition of the tabernacle as the pattern and microcosm of creation.

c) Christ as the dwelling of God

The purpose of the earthly tabernacle built by the people of Israel was to provide a dwelling place for the glory of God:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (וְכִיָּהוּ חֲרוֹן בְּנֵבֶדֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל אַלֶּה תְּרוּמָתָן הָעָנָנִי). (Ex 40:34; cf. 1 Kgs 8:10-11)

John 1:14-16 reworks the key concepts of that verse - glory, filling and tabernacle:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt (ἐσκήνωσεν) among us, full (πλήρης) of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory (δόξαν), glory as of the only Son from the Father.

… And from his fullness (ἐκ τοῦ πληρώματος) have we all received, grace upon grace.

Colossians 1:19 also refers to fullness:

For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell (ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι) …

In 2:9 this seems to be commented upon and clarified:

For in (Christ) the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily (ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος σωματικῶς) …

Gregory relates these references to the tabernacle:

For the power … in which lives the fullness of divinity (ἐν ᾧ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα) … who encompasses everything within himself, is rightly called “tabernacle”. (2.177)

He is taking πλήρωμα as linked to the verb πλήθω in Exodus 40:34. Christ, like the tabernacle, is filled with the fullness/glory of God. Gregory quotes from Col 2:9, but omits σωματικῶς. It would seem that, unlike John1:14, he is referring to the divine, not the earthly Christ. This is confirmed by his reference to ‘fullness’ in Against Eunomius 3.1. There he brings together John 1:1, 1:16 and 1:18:

The one who is in the bosom of the Father (John 1:18) never allows the Paternal bosom to be thought empty of himself. So it is not as something external put into his bosom, but because he is the fullness of all goodness, that the one who is ‘in the beginning’ (John 1.1) is deemed to be always in the Father, not waiting to be generated in him by creation, so that the Father might not ever be deemed wanting in good things. (Eun. 3.1.49; GNO 2.20-21; Hall forthcoming)

50 Commentators on Colossians debate the meaning of σωματικῶς, given the present tense of κατοικεῖ. Rowland (Rowland & Morray-Jones 2009, 161) suggests that it refers to Christ’s glorious heavenly body.

51 In Refutation of the Confession of Faith of Eunomius (GNO 2.191-192; NPNF² 5.129), Gregory joins John 1:16 with John 20:21 (Jesu breathing the Holy Spirit upon the disciples) to prove that the fullness of God dwells in the Holy Spirit.
From Colossians and John, therefore, Gregory pulls out two strands of tradition about the tabernacle/wisdom reapplied to Christ: the tabernacle/wisdom/Christ as the dwelling place of the fullness of God, and the tabernacle/wisdom/Christ as the agent/pattern of creation. To these he adds the theme of the tabernacle/wisdom/Christ becoming created among us, taken from Exodus 35-40; Proverbs 8:22, 9:1 and John 1:14. In naming Christ as σκηνή therefore, Gregory creates three pictures: Christ dwelling within the tabernacle of a human body at the incarnation, Christ as a tent enclosing and protecting the universe, and Christ as a tent containing the fullness of God. He is aware of the potential misunderstanding and misuse of these pictures, which is why he includes a digression on the subject of divine names, which will be examined in the next section.

4.4.2 Alexandrian context

Within Philo’s cosmological interpretation of the tabernacle, the Logos crops up in a number of guises: It is the central branch of the candlestick (Her. 216, 225), the ‘middle bar’ of Exodus 26:28 (QE 2.89) and the veil separating off the holy of holies (QE 2.91). Within the holy of holies Philo places a hierarchy of divine powers, culminating in the Logos (Fug. 100-1; QE 2.68). His interpretation of the high priest’s breastpiece (τὸ λογεῖον) involves the Stoic distinction between the internal and the uttered logos (Mos. 2.127). Clement links Christ with the candlestick (Strom. 5.35.1), and uses the breastpiece as a springboard for comments on Christ’s roles in creation, prophecy and judgement (Strom. 5.38.2, 5.39.1). In his Commentary on Romans, Origen identifies the cherubim with the Word of God and his Holy Spirit, and the mercy-seat with the soul of Jesus (Comm. Rom. 3.8.5). None of these interpretations of the tabernacle furniture are acceptable to Gregory, however, because they imply that the Word of God is inferior to the Father. Nowhere in his allegorical description of the tabernacle does he mention the Logos, and rather than associating Christ with one particular element, he turns the tabernacle as a whole into a type of Christ.

As we have seen, Gregory links the tabernacle to Christ in three different ways, relying heavily on the prologue to John’s Gospel and Colossians 1:16-19, passages which draw on Hellenistic Jewish wisdom traditions. All three ideas can also be found in Philo, with reference either to the tabernacle, wisdom or the Logos:
a) Philo draws on Exodus 25:22 – “I will speak to you from above the propitiatory in between the two Cheroubim” (LXX) – to envisage the Logos at the top of a hierarchy of divine powers within the holy of holies of the earthly tabernacle.  

b) Philo talks of a heavenly paraideigma in connection with both creation and the tabernacle. In Questions on Exodus (52, 82) he seems to imply that it is the same paraideigma, which would make sense, given that he presents the earthly tabernacle as a microcosm of creation. In On the Creation of the World 16 he identifies the paraideigma with the intelligible world, which in turn he either identifies with the Logos:

… it is manifest that the archetypal seal also, which we aver to be the world described by the mind, would be the very Word of God. (Opif. 25)

or places within the Logos:

The incorporeal world, then, was now finished and firmly settled in the Divine Reason … (Opif. 36, cf. 20)

In some of his other works, he describes the Logos as the instrument of creation: “(God) made use of (His Word) like an instrument (ἀφεγάνω), and so made the world” (Leg. 3.96; cf. Migr. 6). He does not, however, make the Logos the agent of creation: he stresses that God himself created the world “with no counsellor to help Him” (Opif. 23).

c) Philo says that “God, the Mind of the universe, has for His house His own Word” (Migr. 4). In the context of the tabernacle, he also talks of wisdom as the dwelling of God:

(Moses) will speak of God’s dwelling place, the tabernacle, as being “ten curtains” (αὐλαίας), for to the structure which includes the whole of wisdom the perfect number ten belongs, and wisdom is the court (αὐλή) and palace of the All-ruler, the sole Monarch, the Sovereign Lord. (Congr. 116)

He brings themes b) and c) together when he says, talking of the creation of light, that “the model or pattern was the Word which contained all (God’s) fullness (πληρέστατος ἦν αὐτοῦ)” (Somn. 1.75).

The ideas with which Gregory is working, therefore, have precedents in Philo, although it is not clear to what extent Gregory is aware of them. One phrase of Gregory’s, however, has direct links to Philo: “who encompasses (περιέχων) everything in himself” (2.174, 175, 177). One of the ways in which Philo expresses God’s transcendence is with the words “enclosing, not enclosed” (περιέχων, ὁ περιεχόμενος).

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52 This will be looked at in more detail in 4.6.2.
53 See 4.3.2.
He produces them when dealing with a biblical text which either includes the word ‘place’ (τόπος), or implies that God can be found at a particular place:

For not even the whole world would be a place fit for God to make His abode, since God is His own place, and He is filled by Himself, filling and containing (πληρῶν καὶ περιέχων) all other things in their destitution and barrenness and emptiness, but Himself contained (περιεχόμενος) by nothing else, seeing that He is Himself One and the Whole. (Leg. 1.44)

This has theological implications, to which we now turn.

4.4.3 Theological context

Gregory accuses Eunomius of “plagiarism from the actual works of Philo”, and promises to demonstrate “the affinity between Eunomius’ doctrines and the words of Jews” (Eun. 3.7.8; GNO 2.217; Hall forthcoming). Paradoxically, however, he combats what he sees as Eunomius’ collusion with the Jewish Philo using two doctrines whose roots go back to Philo: the incomprehensibility and the infinity of God. The incomprehensibility of God has been discussed in 4.2.2, in connection with the imagery of darkness. Gregory indicates the infinity of God with his phrase “who encompasses everything in himself”, echoing Philo’s “enclosing, not enclosed”. Schoedel shows how this formula ‘enclosing, not enclosed’ focused the debate in the early church about the infinity of God, eventually resulting “in a reversal of the Greek evaluation of the infinite” (1979, 75). Philo’s use of it indicates “an impulse to go beyond the Greek tradition in emphasizing the divine transcendence”, but he has “an ambivalent attitude toward the infinite as such” (1979, 76). For Irenaeus it is a weapon against Gnostic dualism (Haer. 2.1.2). It is Gregory of Nyssa who uses it as a clear statement of God’s infinity. In the context of Moses’ request to see God (Ex 33:18), he says:

(Moses) learns from what was said that the Divine is by its very nature infinite (ἀόριστον), enclosed (περιειργόμενον) by no boundary. … Since what is encompassed (περιεχόμενον) is certainly less than what encompasses (περιέχοντος), it would follow that the stronger prevails. Therefore, he who encloses the Divine by any boundary makes out that the Good is ruled over by its opposite. But that is out of the question. Therefore, no consideration will be given to anything enclosing infinite nature. (Vit. Moys. 2.236, 238)

So it would seem that in his interpretation of the tabernacle, Gregory has transformed the understanding of the tabernacle as a structure enclosing the universe, as in earlier cosmological interpretations, into a representation of Christ participating in the infinity of God, and therefore encompassing everything. We have the paradoxical picture of an infinite tent.
Turning now to the incarnation, John 1:14 reads, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt (ἐσκήνωσεν) among us …” Brown says of this verse, “we are being told that the flesh of Jesus Christ is the new localization of God’s presence on earth, and that Jesus is the replacement of the ancient Tabernacle” (1966, 33). It is what gives Gregory permission to talk of the incarnate Christ as σκηνή. There is, however, an important difference between John 1:14 and Gregory’s reference to it. Whereas John 1:14 uses the verb σκηνόω, which leaves open the exact nature of the relationship between ‘Word’ and ‘flesh’, Gregory uses the phrase πήγνυναι σκηνήν (2.174, 175), more in line with John 2:19-21, where Jesus’ body is described as a temple. Σκήνος, a cognate of σκηνή, had long been used to designate the human body. It is used in this way in Wisdom (9:15) and by Paul (2 Cor 5:1-4). In the LXX σκήνωμα and σκηνή are synonymous, both used to translate מְשַׁכן. By Gregory’s time they too have acquired associations with the human body. He uses all three words (σκηνή, σκήνος, σκήνωμα) to refer to the body. With respect to Christ, he talks of the σκήνωμα formed when the Spirit came upon the Virgin (Epist. 3.20; GNO 8,2.25.12); and says that Christ brought the human race back to immortal life through the man in whom he tabernacled (διὰ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ὃς κατεσκήνωσεν) (Eun. 3.3.51; GNO 2.126.5). Koester argues that the use of σκηνόω in John 1:14 is “a play on words that embraces both ‘flesh’ and ‘glory’” (1989, 102): ‘flesh’ because it resembles σκήνος, and ‘glory’ because it resembles σκηνή. Michaelis thinks that the most important background to its use is the Hebrew root מְשַׁכן:

It would appear that ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν in Jn. 1:14 does not refer to the temporary and transitory element in the earthly existence of the Logos but is designed to show that this is the presence of the Eternal in time. (1971, 386)

In Gregory, however, the σκηνή of the earthly tabernacle would seem to be invoking the temporary human body within which Christ consents to be confined: “created in having received this material composition (τῷ δὲ ύλικῷ ταύτῃ δέξασθαι σύστασιν κτίσμαν γενομένην)” (2.174). This explains why his imagery was not taken up by later patristic authors: it implied too extrinsic a relationship between the human and divine natures of Christ. From the fifth century onwards, ‘tabernacle’ was used as a metaphor for the Virgin Mary, in whose case an extrinsic relationship with deity was more appropriate.

54 It occurs in Democritus and in Pseudo-Plato Axiochos. See Michaelis (1971, 381) and Daniélou (1956a, 345 n.27).

55 See On Virginity 4 (GNO 8,1.270.25, 271.2), and On the Inscription of the Psalms 2.6 (GNO 5.87.10).

56 See, for example, Proclus of Constantinople Homily 6.17.9: Αὕτη ἡ σκηνή τοῦ μαρτυρίου, ἀφ’ ἧς νεός ὄν ὁ ἀληθινὸς Ἰησοῦς μετὰ τὸν ἐναμηνιαῖον τοῦ ἐμβρύου χρόνον, ἔξεπορεύετο (Leroy 1967, 323).
Daley argues that although Gregory’s Christology “does not easily fit into the taxonomy of fifth-century controversy” and has therefore been seen as “puzzling and unsatisfactory” (2003, 67), when considered on its own terms is “remarkably powerful and also remarkably consistent, both in itself and with the rest of his thought on God, creation, and the mystery of salvation” (2003, 68). Gregory developed his conception of Christ’s person and work in controversy with Apollinarians. In his Reply to the Teachings of Apollinaris, he says,

> Who does not know that the God revealed to us in flesh, according to the word of pious tradition, is immaterial and invisible and uncompounded, and that he was and is infinite and uncircumscribed, existing everywhere and penetrating all creation, but that he has been seen, as far as appearance goes, in human circumscription (ἐν ἀνθρωπίνῃ περιγραγῇ)? (GNO 3,1.156.14-18; Daley 2003, 70)

The eternal Christ never changes, but by his ‘taking up’ of human form the transformation of humanity was made possible:

> He mingled with what is human and received our entire nature within himself, so that the human might mingle with what is divine and be divinized with it, and that the whole mass of our nature might be made holy through that first-fruit. (Antirrh.; GNO 3,1.151.16-20; Daley 2002, 479)

As Daley says, “What changes in the narrative of God’s ‘self-emptying’ is not God, nor even Christ as an eternal divine person, but the ‘human being’ in which he ‘formed himself’ to meet the capacities of our senses” (2002, 480). None of this is spelt out in Life of Moses, but the soteriological motive is clearly signaled:

> … for our sakes, who had lost our existence through our thoughtlessness, it consented to be born like us so that it might bring that which had left reality back again to reality. (2.175)

By later standards, Gregory’s Christology is untenable because it manages to be ‘Nestorian’ and ‘Monophysite’ at the same time. It distinguishes two persons in Jesus – Christ dwelling in a human tent; yet from the resurrection confuses the divine and human natures: “the humanity of Jesus (being) gradually transformed by the dominant power of the divine nature, so that in the end – like a drop of vinegar in a boundless ocean – it is virtually unrecognizable, swallowed up in the greatness of God” (Daley 2003, 67-8). As Daley points out, however,

> He rarely uses the vocabulary he and his fellow Cappadocians had so carefully honed for Trinitarian discussions to express what is one and what is manifold in Christ, but speaks instead in a variety of scriptural and philosophical images which were richly suggestive for him, but which were used for different purposes by both sides of the Christological conflicts a half-century later. (2003, 68)

One of those images is the tabernacle: the celestial tabernacle as a representation of the infinite Christ containing the fullness of God and the whole of creation, the earthly tabernacle as the human body within which the pre-existent Christ consents to be born.
At the incarnation, the heavenly tabernacle is, as it were, turned inside out: the infinite becomes contained within a finite ‘tent’. Douglass, who discusses Gregory’s understanding of language in the context of postmodern philosophy, calls this a ‘metadiastemic intrusion’. Douglass places “the Christian appropriation of Jewish conceptions of sacred space” (2005, 26) at the centre of his analysis of Gregory’s theology. He focuses on Gregory’s use of the concept of diastema (“the gap, the interval, the space, the inescapable horizontal extensions of both space and time” (2005, 6)). According to Gregory, all human existence is diastemic: “all of creation moves, breathes, thinks and speaks within the receptacles of time and space” (2005, 36). God, however, “is completely free of any distanciation” (2005, 35); God is adiastemic. It is a constitutional impossibility for human beings to reach across the gap between their created diastemic existence and the adiastemic essence of God. God, however, can choose to interact with creation through metadiastemic intrusions. A metadiastemic intrusion is “the diastemic construction of an impenetrable space within which dwells the adiastemic presence of God. ... In such a maneuver, even though the boundary between the created and the uncreated realms remains entirely intact ... there is a reversal of inside/outside, contained/uncontained and finite/infinite” (2005, 132). Douglass argues that in developing this understanding, the Cappadocians were drawing upon the biblical “history of impenetrable, circumscribed spaces within which dwelt the inaccessible presence of God” (2005, 133), including the tent of meeting, the Solomonic temple and, supremely, the incarnation:

Moses literally constructed a physical space out of diastemic materials – a σκηνή of skins. Once he was finished, once the space was completely enclosed, the glory of God simultaneously filled this space and made it inaccessible. ... By the initiation of God, it became an impenetrable space, a dark space ... within which uncreated reality resided, a space within the διάστημα that transcended the διάστημα, a metadiastemic intrusion. (2005, 134)

The most significant biblical metadiastemic intrusion is, of course, the incarnation. ... With the verb ἐσκήνωσεν (John 1:14), the gospel writer embedded the incarnation within the Biblical tradition of the presence of God on earth constituted by the sacral space of the “Holy of Holies” – a tradition which began with the wilderness σκηνή. (2005, 138)

The name ‘tabernacle’ is appropriate for Christ, because the incarnate Christ, like the tabernacle, performed the impossible feat of containing the infinite, adiastemic God.

4.4.4 Heavenly ascent context

Gregory was not the first to work Christology into an ascent to the heavenly tabernacle/temple. As Christians took over Jewish ideas and Jewish texts, they wove
Christian ideas into them. But they did so in different ways, and to different extents. 2
*Enoch* was transmitted in Christian circles, and yet it displays “a total lack of a Christian
Savior or scheme of salvation. On the contrary, Enoch occupies an exalted position as
God’s chosen and prime agent which is totally incompatible with Christian belief in
Jesus as Messiah” (Andersen 1983, 96). Sometimes Christian additions made little
difference to the structure of the heavenly world. *Testament of Levi* contains predictions
clearly referring to Jesus Christ (e.g. 4:4, 18:6-7); but, in his vision, Levi simply sees “the
Most High upon a throne of glory” (5:1; Hollander & de Jonge 1985, 143). Isaiah,
however, in *Ascension of Isaiah*, sees two figures on either side of the Great Glory: one is
“the Beloved” (3:13, 7:17, 8:18) or “your Lord, the Lord, the Lord Christ, who is to be
called in the world Jesus” (9:5; Knibb 1985, 169-170) and the other is “the angel of the
Holy Spirit” (9:36; Knibb 1985, 172). They are worshipped by the angels, while they in
turn worship the Great Glory. Hannah argues that *Ascension of Isaiah* is drawing on a
pre-existing Jewish Christian exegesis of Isaiah 6, although it corrects the tradition in the
direction of orthodoxy, avoiding “any implication that the Beloved is an angel” (1999a,
100).

The first attempts to fit Christ into the heavenly world come in the New Testament.
The Gospel of Mark draws on Daniel 7:13-14, with Jesus predicting that “you will see
the Son of man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven”
(14:62). John 12:41, in contrast to the exegetical tradition behind *Ascension of Isaiah*,
“identifies the object of Isaiah’s vision with the pre-existent Christ” (Hannah 1999a, 81).
*Revelation* deploys a variety of imagery: Christ is “one like a son of man, clothed with a
long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast...” (1:12-18); “a Lamb standing, as
though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes” (5:6-14); the Word of
God riding on a white horse, “clad in a robe dipped in blood” (19:11-16). The dominant
image in Hebrews is of Christ as the high priest in the heavenly tabernacle. This is a role
taken by Michael and Metatron in Jewish works. The tradition probably has deep roots:
in *1 Enoch* 9:1 Michael is listed alongside Sariel, Raphael, and Gabriel as interceding for
humanity, and in Daniel he is “the great prince who has charge of (Israel)” (12:1, cf.
10:13, 21); but the texts which explicitly portray him as the heavenly priest are post-
second Temple. In *b. Hagigah* 12b, for example, Michael, the great Prince, stands and
makes offerings at the altar of the heavenly Jerusalem, situated in *Zebul*, the fourth
heaven (cf. *Men* 110a, *Zeb* 62a). Metatron’s tabernacle (*משכן*) is referred to in the
Hekhalot literature (e.g. §390). At the beginning of chapter 15B of *3 Enoch*, which exists
only in a couple of manuscripts, his “great heavenly tabernacle of light” is “beneath the throne of glory” (15B:1; Alexander 1983, 303). Boyarin argues “that late-ancient rabbinic literature and associated texts afford us a fair amount of evidence for and information about a belief in (and perhaps cult of) a second divine person within so-called ‘orthodox’ rabbinic circles long after the advent of Christianity” (2008). He includes Logos, Memra, Sophia, Metatron, Son of Man, Son of God, and Christ among “the various second-God theologies of Jews” (2008), with the enthronement scene of Daniel 7 as “the pumping heart of the tradition” (2010, 349). Schäfer cautions that we need to take the late date of 3 Enoch seriously, and therefore cannot connect Metatron directly with early traditions such as the hypostasized ‘Wisdom’ or ‘Logos’ (2009, 323-4). He suggests that Enoch’s transformation into Metatron is a response to the New Testament’s message about Jesus Christ. But whether a continuous tradition or not, there are Jewish and Christian works with a second figure beside the divine throne. From the fourth century onwards, religious authority figures in both traditions become unhappy with these depictions. The rabbinic attempt to expel “the Two-Powers theology from within themselves by naming it as minut, heresy” (Boyarin 2010, 335). Both b. Hagigah 15a and 3 Enoch 16 (§20) tell the story of Aḥer ascending to heaven, seeing Metatron, and coming to the conclusion that there are ‘two powers’ in heaven, as a result of which both Aḥer and Metatron are punished. Despite variations in detail, the stories are obviously related, although there is disagreement as to which influenced the other. Alexander gives priority to the Talmudic version, in which Metatron is seated because of his scribal activity. He suggests that the author of 3 Enoch seized on this and used it “as a way of introducing material on Metatron’s throne and retinue” (1987, 65). Boyarin, on the other hand, argues that the Talmud has taken the coherent and intelligible 3 Enoch version and muddied it on purpose, deliberately obliterating the throne. He sees the Talmudic text as “engaged in a massive struggle, as it itself seems to understand, with such highly ancient and well-rooted elements of Jewish religiosity as the second Throne, and a second divine person who absorbs the translated Enoch” (2010, 352-3):

The dual inscription of excommunication in the narrative, that of Meṭaṭron on the one hand and of his ‘devotee’ on the other, suggests strongly to me that it is the belief in this figure as second divine principle that is being anathematized (although somehow the Rabbis seem unable to completely dispense with him – he was just too popular, it would seem). (2010, 350-351)

Boyarin stresses that this ‘heretical’ notion is located right at the heart of the rabbinic academy, symbolised by the fact that Aḥer is “the pejorative nickname for this once ‘kosher’ rabbi after his turn to ‘heresy’” (2004b, 355). ‘Two powers’ in heaven became
What was unacceptable to Gregory was any suggestion that the second power (and the third!) was inferior to the first. Like the rabbis, he was not dealing with a fringe 'heresy', but with ideas that were circulating at the heart of his community. Rather than expelling the Logos, however, he promoted it. In his description of the heavenly tabernacle there are no figures on thrones, only allusions to the ineffable secrets of the ark of the covenant, covered by the wings of the cherubim. The essence neither of God nor of Christ can be depicted using visual imagery.

Behind both heavenly ascent texts and Christology lurk the questions: How is the divide between heaven and earth to be bridged? Can humans have contact with the divine? They are answered in a wide variety of ways. Sometime the divide is ‘bridged’ from the ‘divine’ side, by the Logos, Wisdom, Torah or Christ. Sometimes there is an angelic mediating figure, or a heavenly high priest. In ascent texts, exceptional human beings are apotheosised: taken into heaven. This can be an arduous and dangerous journey. In the Hekhalot texts, “the ascending adept finds himself confronted by angels whose precise business is to keep him out” (Alexander 2011, 175):

If he ... is not worthy to descend to the Merkavah, [and] if they say to him:

Enter!

and he [then immediately] enters,

[then] they immediately throw pieces of iron at him.

(Hekhalot Rabbati §258; Schäfer 1992, 37)

Even one who is worthy to gaze at God’s beauty risks being torn apart and poured out like a jug (Hekhalot Rabbati §159). Davila argues that this is not a punishment, but a transformation “at least temporarily, into a fiery angel” (2001, 154). For “bodily ascent into the alien, hostile, realm of heaven demands bodily transformation” (Alexander 2011, 181).58 (Ascension of Isaiah 10:17-31 depicts the opposite process: as Christ descends, he takes on the form of the angels in each of the heavens he passes through.) Schäfer sees the rabbinic commentary on ‘the work of creation’ (b. Hagigah 12b-13a) as “a polemic against the ascent apocalypses and Merkava mysticism” which “adopts some major components of this literature but neutralizes and marginalizes them” (Schäfer 2005, 56). One example is its reproduction of a midrash on the dimensions of the heavens, also found in Hekhalot material.59 The midrash describes the distances involved in crossing the seven firmaments and ascending above the Ḥayyot and the

57 Abrams, following Segal (1977, 7-8 n.8), emphasises that what the rabbis objected to was “an opposition or competition of wills”: ‘two ruling authorities’ in heaven (1994, 298).

58 See 4.10.4.

59 For details of the sources see Alexander (2011, 175 n.9).
thron of glory to reach the high and exalted King, which increase exponentially. In the Talmudic context, the moral drawn is that ascent “is a presumptuous enterprise, undertaken out of sheer hubris, an act of rebellion against God” (Schäfer 2005, 57). The conclusion quotes Isaiah’s condemnation of King Nebuchadnezzar:

You said: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High! No, you shall be brought down to She’ol, to the uttermost parts of the pit! (Isa 14:14-15; b. Hag. 13a; Schäfer 2005, 57)

The rabbis condemn any effort to ascend to heaven.

4.4.5 Conclusions

At first sight it might seem an impossible task to compare the abstract, theological language in which Gregory expresses his Christology with the vivid imagery of the heavenly ascent texts. However, probing beneath the surface to the questions being asked yields interesting results. As Douglass points out, in calling Christ ‘tabernacle’ Gregory is participating in the “Christian appropriation of Jewish conceptions of sacred space” (2005, 26). Douglass is referring to the biblical traditions surrounding the tabernacle and Solomon’s temple. But some of the paradoxes in Gregory’s use of tabernacle imagery resemble later Jewish descriptions of the heavenly temple. There seem to be logical inconsistencies in Gregory’s interpretation: Can one have an infinite tent? Is Christ a tabernacle containing creation, the fullness of God, or both? How can the uncreated God fit into a created tabernacle? These are the paradoxes of Christology, and of the incarnation in particular. But they are also the paradoxes of the heavenly world, described in 4.3.4.

As a consequence of the Arian controversy, Gregory works in a theological context in which Christ as a mediator figure is no longer acceptable. He cannot therefore use the imagery of Hebrews and Revelation, or indeed the Logos theology of Philo and Clement. Gregory and the rabbis agree that there is no subordinate God; but whereas in b. Hagigah 15a the rabbis attempt to demote Metatron, Gregory absorbs Christ into the one God.

Christ is fully divine. We see here religious authority figures drawing up the boundaries which will effect the parting of the ways. Gregory superimposes upon the Platonic noetic/sensible division an absolute ontological division between Creator and creation. Christ does not descend from one realm into another, but takes the uncreated into the created. There is also no apotheosis. Whereas in the heavenly ascent texts a few exceptional individuals do manage to cross the dangerous boundary between heaven and earth to glimpse the heavenly throne, becoming transformed in the process, according to

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Gregory, human beings are constrained by their created nature, and cannot apprehend the uncreated God. Christ, however, has initiated a transformation in which all can participate. In *Life of Moses*, Gregory talks of this transformation when he moves on to the priestly vestments. But it does not involve crossing the created/uncreated divide:

By shifting the ontological opposition from the boundary between sensible and intelligible to the distinction between creator and created, he has established not a barrier that cannot be penetrated, but something like a mathematical asymptote that can be approached, but never reached. (Mosshammer 2000, 367)

There is therefore in Gregory no ‘absorption mysticism’; but rather an endless “straining toward those things that are still to come” (*Vit. Moys*. 1.5, quoting Phil 3:13). Unlike the rabbis, Gregory does not condemn the desire to reach heaven; but he does redefine what is possible. Human ascent is only possible by participating in the transformation initiated by Christ; and it is an infinite journey with no possibility of crossing the created/uncreated divide. The differences between Gregory and the heavenly ascent texts can be summarised in diagrammatic form:
Earlier pictures of incarnation e.g. Phil 2:5-8 or Ascension of Isaiah

Series of heavens: it is difficult and dangerous to travel through them, but not impossible.

Pre-existent Christ entering creation as metadiastemic intrusion

Gregory:

Humanity becoming transformed asymptotic approach

barrier that cannot be crossed

uncreated (adiastemic)

created (diastemic)
4.5 Divine names

But if we name such a God “tabernacle,” the person who loves Christ should not be disturbed at all on the grounds that the suggestion involved in the phrase diminishes the magnificence of the nature of God. For neither is any other name worthy of the nature thus signified, but all names have equally fallen short of accurate description, both those recognized as insignificant as well as those by which some great insight is indicated. (*Vit. Moys.* 2.176)

4.5.1 *Life of Moses* 2.176-177 and its biblical context

Gregory interrupts his discussion of the tabernacle as a type of Christ for a short digression on divine names. The significance of the names applied to God is a frequent theme in his writings, and key to his argument with Eunomius. Eunomius claimed that the name ‘unbegotten’ (*ἀγέννητος*) defined God’s essence, and that “as God’s being is absolutely simple, every name said of God either means ‘unbegotten’ too or is wrongly applied to the Supreme Being” (Zachhuber 2007, 259). In contrast, Gregory insisted that the essence of God could not be known, or named. By invoking that argument here, he implies that not even a vision of ‘the tabernacle not made with hands’ gave Moses privileged access to the essence of God. Alongside this insistence on the unknowability of God, however, he developed a “symbolic theology through which some degree of theological knowledge was made possible” (Young 1997, 141), based on God’s self-accommodation to the constraints of human expression in the language of Scripture:

We find in each of the names a peculiar reflection (*ἰδιάζουσαν ἔμφασιν*) suitable to be thought and said about the divine nature, but not signifying what that nature is according to its substance (*κατ’ οὐσίαν*). (*AbI.; GNO* 3.1.43; Rusch 1980, 152).

Here in *Life of Moses*, Gregory lists other scriptural names given to Christ which, like ‘tabernacle’, “in keeping with what is being specified, are each used piously to express the divine power” (2.177). He produces similar lists elsewhere,\(^60\) and devotes the treatise *On Perfection* to expounding how “the participation of one’s soul and speech and activities in all of the names by which Christ is signified” (*GNO* 8.1.212; Callahan 1967, 121) leads to perfection in the Christian life. Each list is slightly different, and this is the only one in which ‘tabernacle’ features. He also includes the Johannine names ‘shepherd’ (John 10:11), ‘bread’ (6:35), ‘vine’ (15:1), ‘way’ (14:6), ‘door’ (10:7),

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\(^60\) See *Against Eunomius* 2.294, 300, 347-349 (*GNO* 1.313, 314, 327); *Against Eunomius* 3.1.127 (*GNO* 2.46); *Against Eunomius* 3.8.10 (*GNO* 2.242); *Refutation of the Confession of Eunomius* 124 (*GNO* 2.365) and *To Simplicius* (*GNO* 3.1.62).
‘mansion’ (14:23), \(^6\) and ‘water’ (4:13-14); two other names from the New Testament: ‘physician’ (Mt 9:12, Mk 2:17, Luke 5:31) and ‘rock’ (1 Cor 10:4); and two from the Old Testament: ‘protector’ (ὑπερασπιστής, frequent in the Psalms e.g. LXX Ps 17:3) and ‘spring’ (πηγή, LXX Ps 35:10). Although these two paragraphs read like a digression, written to counter any arguments against the suitability of using ‘tabernacle’ as a name for God, they have the effect of modifying the goal of Moses’ ascent. Now it seems that the revelation vouchsafed to him was a new name for God, a name overlooked by previous biblical commentators. Like all other divine names, as will be explored further below, it only describes the ‘things around God’, not God’s essence. But Gregory puts it on a par with the well-known Johannine christological titles.

4.5.2 Alexandrian context

Gregory’s insistence on the unknowability of God, and therefore on the impossibility of naming God definitively, has precedents in the Alexandrian tradition. Both Philo and Clement link God’s transcendence with God’s unnameability:

He has no proper name, and … whatever name anyone may use of Him he will use by licence of language; for it is not the nature of Him that is to be spoken of, but simply to be. (Somn. 1.230)

How can that be expressed which is neither genus, nor difference, nor species, nor individual, nor number; nae more, is neither an event, nor that to which an event happens? No one can rightly express Him wholly, ... Nor are any parts to be predicated of Him. For the One is indivisible; wherefore also it is infinite, not considered with reference to inscrutability, but with reference to its being without dimensions, and not having a limit. And therefore it is without form and name. (Strom. 5.81.5-6; Wilson 1869, 270)

Clement makes explicit reference to Plato’s declaration in Timaeus 28c:

“For both is it a difficult task to discover the Father and Maker of this universe; and having found Him, it is impossible to declare Him to all. For this is by no means capable of expression, like the other subjects of instruction,” says the truth-loving Plato. (Strom. 5.78.1; Wilson 1869, 267)

As a Christian, however, he has to reconcile this with the many names given to God in Scripture. He does so by saying that, taken together, they indicate the power of God:

If we name it, we do not do so properly, even in terming it either the One, or the Good, or Mind, or Absolute Being, or Father, or God, or Creator, or Lord. We speak not as supplying His name; but out of helplessness we use good names, so that the mind has these for support and does not wander after others. For each one by itself does not express God; but all together are indicative of the power of the

\(^6\) Mansion (μονή) does not occur in any other list. It seems slightly forced as a christological title, but is perhaps included because, like tabernacle, it refers to a dwelling. There is also, however, a variant reading: νομή (John 10:9). In Against Eunomius 3.8.7-9 (GNO 2.240-2) Gregory talks of Christ as ‘pasture’, bringing in Psalm 23:2.
Gregory’s difficulties, therefore, in reconciling his apophaticism with the language of Scripture are not new.

In Antiquity, knowledge of the right name conferred power:

One of the basic presuppositions of magical practice, both in Greco-Roman Antiquity and elsewhere, is that there is power in names, or to be more exact, in the magician’s knowledge of names. (Dillon 1985, 203)

Christian texts too acknowledged the power of names, as demonstrated by Clement’s commentary on the ‘enigmas’ of the temple. He writes,

Furthermore there is the mystic name of four letters, which was affixed to those alone to whom the adytum was accessible; it is called Jahwe, which is interpreted as ‘Who is and shall be’. (Strom. 5.34.5; van den Hoek 1988, 126)

The high priest had access to the holy of holies thanks to the name inscribed upon his petalon. Later in the passage Clement interprets this inscribed name as the Son, in whom the invisible God becomes manifest (Strom. 5.38.6-7). Entry into the holy of holies, however, represents “knowledge of the ineffable”, and therefore involves “ascending above every name that is made known by the sound of a voice” (Strom. 5.34.7; van den Hoek 1988, 126). This theme of transcendence is taken further in Excerpts from Theodotus. There the high priest is said to remove the petalon before entering the holy of holies, a detail found neither in Leviticus 16 nor in Miscellanies:

The priest on entering within the second veil removed the plate at the altar of incense, and entered himself in silence with the name engraved upon his heart, indicating the laying aside of the body which has become pure like the golden plate and bright through the purification of the soul and on which was stamped the luster of piety, by which he was recognized by the Principalities and Powers as having put on the Name. (Exc. 27.1-2; Lilla 1971, 176)

The Name is necessary as a password when faced with Principalities and Powers, but can now be carried in the heart. Compared with the importance given to the petalon in Miscellanies and Excerpts from Theodotus, Gregory’s treatment of it in his section on the priestly vestments seems brief to the point of dismissal:

The head adorned with the diadem signifies the crown reserved for those who have lived well. It is beautified by an inscription of ineffable letters in gold leaf. Whoever has put on such adornment wears no sandals ... (Vit. Moys. 2.201)

He does not see the divine Name as granting access to the holy of holies, the essence of God.
Origen comments on the power of divine names. When Celsus alleges that “Christians get the power which they seem to possess by pronouncing the names of certain daemons and incantations”, Origen replies,

They do not get the power which they seem to possess by any incantations but by the name of Jesus with the recital of the histories about him. For when these are pronounced they have often made daemons to be driven out of men, and especially when those who utter them speak with real sincerity and genuine belief. In fact the name of Jesus is so powerful against the daemons that sometimes it is effective even when pronounced by bad men. (Cels. 1.6; Chadwick 1980, 9-10)

Further on, he compares the Hebrew divine names with the powerful names used by Egyptian wise men and Persian magi, saying,

The names Sabaoth, and Adonai, and all the other names that have been handed down by the Hebrews with great reverence, are not concerned with ordinary created things, but with a certain mysterious divine science that is related to the Creator of the universe. (Cels. 1.24; Chadwick 1980, 24)

Dillon argues that Origen “relates the question of the efficacy of magical formulae to the philosophical debate as to the origin and nature of language” (1985, 207). Origen follows Stoic etymological theory, derived from an interpretation of Plato’s Cratylus, and adopted by later Platonists, in which names can be a guide to the true nature of things. In Cratylus 390DE Socrates remarks,

Cratylus is right in saying that names belong to things by nature (φύσει) and that not every one is an artisan of names, but only he who keeps in view the name which belongs by nature to each particular thing and is able to embody its form in the letters and syllables.

He follows this up a little later by suggesting that it is the gods who know the right names:

(Homer) distinguishes between the names by which gods and men call the same things. Do you not think he gives in those passages great and wonderful information about the correctness of names? For clearly the gods call things by the names that are naturally right. (391DE)

Neoplatonists commented on these remarks, as we shall have reason to discuss in connection with Eunomius; but Dillon suggests that “already in Origen’s time there existed in the Platonic tradition a theory of the magical efficacy of divine names” (1985, 212), a theory with which Origen, a Christian philosopher, had no quarrel. Origen generalises from his understanding of the names used in spells to the divine origin of all language:

We say ... with regard to the nature of names that they are not arbitrary conventions of those who give them, as Aristotle thinks. For the languages in use among men have not a human origin, which is clear to those able to give careful attention to the nature of spells which were adapted by the authors of the languages in accordance with each different language and different pronunciation. (Cels. 5.45; Chadwick 1980, 299)
Gregory’s lists of the names given to Christ fit into a longstanding Christian tradition, and, in particular, follow Origen’s delight “in listing the fascinating array of attributes and titles which scripture gives to the Logos” (Young 1979a, 65), best seen in the *Commentary on John*. There Origen reflects on the significance of names from John (Word, life, light, truth, way, resurrection, door, lamb, shepherd, teacher …), Paul (wisdom, power, chief cornerstone, propitiatory, great high priest …), and the prophets (sharp sword, chosen arrow, servant, rod, flower …). Occasionally he calls these names *epinoiai* – conceptions:

Although Jesus was one, he had several aspects (ἕς δὲν πλείονα τῇ ἐμινοίᾳ ἦν); and to those who saw him he did not appear alike to all. That he had many aspects (τῇ ἐπινοίᾳ πλείονα ἦν) is clear from the saying, “I am the way, the truth, and the life”, and “I am the bread”, and “I am the door”, and countless other such sayings. (Cels. 2.64; Borret 1967, 434; Chadwick 1980, 115)

Zachhuber comments,

The point of (Origen’s) elaboration is that Jesus is different things to various kinds of people. … He argues that Jesus, in his earthly life and after, appeared to people according to their capacity of recognising the divine. (2007, 264-5)

Each name corresponds to a particular human experience of Christ. The variety and multiplicity of the names corresponds to the variety and multiplicity of the creation in need of salvation:

God … is altogether one and simple (πάντη ἐν ἑστι καὶ ἅπλοῦν). Our Savior, however, because of the many things (διὰ τὰ πολλά), since God “set” him “forth as a propitiation” and firstfruits of all creation, becomes many things, or perhaps even all these things, as the whole creation which can be made free needs him. (Comm. Jo. 1.119; Blanc 1966, 122; Heine 1989, 58)

A few of the names, however, seem to relate not only to Christ’s saving activity, but also to his divine identity:

He is … a “way” for others, and so too a “door,” and a “rod,” as all would agree. But he is “wisdom” for himself and others, and perhaps this is true also of “Word.” And we must inquire, since there is a system of ideas in him insofar as he is “wisdom,” if there are some ideas (θεωρήματα) that are incomprehensible to all begotten nature except himself, which he knows for himself. (Comm. Jo. 2.126; Blanc 1966, 290; Heine 1989, 127-8)

These aspects “name both the Son’s being in his turning to God and the relation to us that springs from this. ‘Logos,’ for example, signifies God’s own Word before it signifies the agent of revelation” (O’Leary 2004, 143). But both in his divine identity and his saving role Christ mediates between the unity of God and the multiplicity of creation:

(Origen’s) intention … is to offer a vision in which Christ mediates between the absolute simplicity of God and the utter multiplicity of the created world. The fact that he is the redeemer is inextricably intertwined with this mediating role. He is

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62 See Malherbe & Ferguson 1978, 180 n.223 for examples.
one, but becomes many in his soteriological activity. Again, he can become many because he is not as simple as God is. (Zachhuber 2007, 265-6)

Eunomius, as we shall see, picks up on this difference between the simplicity of God and the multiplicity associated with Christ. He also follows Origen in arguing for the divine origin of names. Gregory, on the other hand, will admit no difference between God and Christ, and sees language as a human construct.

4.5.3 Theological context

Young suggests that behind Gregory’s discussions of divine names is the questioning of religious language produced by the Arian controversy. Until the fourth century, the Logos had functioned as the link between the ultimate, transcendent God and the multiplicity of creation. Once the Logos as well as God was defined as transcending human comprehension, the basis of religious language was undermined. It was Gregory of Nyssa “who more than any other, recognised that the radical distinction between creator and creature rendered the traditional accounts of religious knowledge unusable” (Young 1979a, 66). His answer to the problem came through his theology of the divine names, forged in the conflict with Eunomius. Eunomius was

an advocate of a representational theory of language. Things are perceived as they exist in their essences. God created intelligible concepts that correspond directly to those essences and that can be expressed unambiguously in language. (Mosshammer 1990, 100)

He insisted on the sacred character of language, arguing that “God has a name given by God to himself and that name is ἀγέννητος” (Meredith 2007, 251). This then of course automatically excluded the Son, begotten by definition, from the divine nature. He dismissed any other names given to God as mere human inventions (ἐπίνοιαι) and of no value:

When we say ‘Unbegotten’, then, we do not imagine that we ought to honour God only in name, in conformity with human invention (κατ’ ἐπίνοιαν ἀνθρωπίνην); rather, in conformity with reality, we ought to repay him the debt which above all others is most due God: the acknowledgement that he is what he is. Expressions based on invention have their existence in name and utterance only, and by their nature are dissolved along with the sounds [which make them up]; but God ... both was and is unbegotten. (Eunomius Apology 8; Vaggione 1987, 40-3)

In reply, Gregory put forward four claims:

He argues, first, that language is a human invention and therefore both arbitrary and fallible, so that the ability of language to express any reality whatsoever in its own essence is questionable. Secondly, he maintains that language is bound to an order of reality so entirely unlike the divine nature that words cannot even inadequately address the being of God. Third, Gregory argues that all apparently theological language, including the language of the Bible, can in fact only have the
created order as its referent. Finally, Gregory claims that to the extent theological language expresses divine truths at all such language can have no fixed content, but must forever be reinterpreted in an endless pursuit of an ever elusive meaning. (Mosshammer 1990, 100-1)

Gregory suggests that the names we apply to God come from two sources: Scripture and the human power of reasoning, but in neither case do they give access to God’s essence. (Gregory, of course, unlike Eunomius, includes Christ when talking about God.) He uses the word ἐπίνοια positively, as “our own reflection on the concepts we form through the reflective power we have from God” (Meredith 2007, 249). Because the power of thought and language comes from God, it produces appropriate names when used to contemplate the works of God. “Creation and scripture guarantee that the names of God are more than a figment of the human imagination; for creation and scripture are expressive of God’s will and God is truth” (Young 1979a, 68). However, they designate God’s energies – whatever is ‘around’ the divine nature, rather than that nature itself:

It is clear that the Divinity is given names with various connotations (κατὰ διαφόρους σημασίας) in accordance with the variety of his activities (πρὸς τὸ ποικίλον τῶν ἐνεργειών), named in such a way as we may understand. (Eun. 2.304; GNO 1.315; Hall 2007, 127)

Any name, whether discovered by human custom or transmitted by Scripture, is, we say, explicative of what we discover through thought concerning what is around the divine nature (τῶν περὶ τὴν θείαν φύσιν νοουμένων), but does not contain the significance of the nature itself. (Abl.; GNO 3.1.42-3; Krivocheine 1977, 88)

We build up our understanding by producing a whole variety of names:

Since no one title (ὄνομα) has been discovered to embrace the divine Nature by applying directly to the subject itself, we therefore use many titles (πολλοῖς ὄνομασι), each person in accordance with various interests achieving some particular idea about him, to name the Divinity, as we hunt amid the pluriform variety of terms applying to him for sparks to light up our understanding of the object of our quest. (Eun. 2.145; GNO 1.267; Hall 2007, 90)

In this debate between Gregory and Eunomius, the meaning of ἐπίνοια changes in emphasis from its use in Origen. As Daniélou says, for Origen “ἐπίνοια a ... un sens particulier, celui d’une diversité de notions relatives à une réalité unique” (1956b, 417). Eunomius, while insisting that the Father is absolutely simple, and can only be named ἀγέννητος, is happy to assign a certain multiplicity to the Only-begotten:

It is reasonable, (Eunomius) says, to suppose that the Only-begotten God is in various ways subject to concepts because of the variety of his actions and certain analogies and relationships: he spells out at length these titles applied to him. (Eun. 2.363; GNO 1.332; Hall 2007, 140)

This is in line with Origen’s use. Daniélou comments,
Gregory, on the other hand, sees multiplicity not in Christ, but in human notions about Christ. The essence of both Father and Son, to which human beings have no access, is simple; the variety of ἐπίνοιαι reflects the impossibility of talking about God in human language. Gregory accuses Eunomius of having borrowed his ideas from Plato’s Cratylus, “(stitching) together his own nonsense with the rubbish he found there” (Eun. 2.403-4; GNO 1.344; Hall 2007, 150). Daniélou sees this as a clue that Eunomius has been influenced by ideas from contemporary neoplatonist circles. The disciples of Iamblichus in particular seem to have drawn both on Socrates’ remarks in Cratylus 390DE and 391DE, and on material from the Chaldean Oracles, such as Fr. 150: “Do not change the nomina barbara” (Majercik 1989, 107), to produce an understanding of efficacious divinely revealed names:

In those names for which we have received scientific analysis, we possess a knowledge of the whole divine essence, power, and order (θείας οὐσίας καὶ δυνάμεως καὶ τάξεως), comprehended in the name. (Iamblichus On the Mysteries 7.4; Des Places 1966, 192; Taylor 1895, 292-3)

Whether influenced by neoplatonist interest in theurgy or not, Eunomius’ understanding of language picks up on the widespread belief in the power of divine names found not only in magical texts and on amulets but also in Origen.

In Life of Moses, Gregory says that “all names have equally fallen short of accurate description, both those recognized as insignificant as well as those by which some great insight is indicated” (2.176), implying that there is a hierarchy among divine names. Young argues that

Gregory does make distinctions among the ‘names’ offered by scripture ... Some are to be referred to God absolutely, others are relative. ... The terms used ‘relatively’ are invariably those that relate to the oikonomia, to God’s relationship with the world, to the divine activity in creation, providence and salvation, whether one speaks of Father or Son. The terms used ‘absolutely’ are those that refer to the Being of God, especially the eternal being in relationship which is the absolute nature of Father and Son. (1997, 143)

As she observes, this distinction “easily slips into a traditional Christological pattern” with ‘absolute’ terms assigned to Christ’s Godhead and ‘relative’ ones to his humanity (1979a, 69). Where does ‘tabernacle’ fit? By placing it alongside the Johannine names, Gregory seems to be assigning it to the ‘relative’ category. Certainly as a designation for the incarnation it would fit there. And when he talks of “the power which encompasses
the universe” and “the common protector of all, who encompasses everything within himself” (2.177) he would seem to be talking of Christ’s role in creation, again part of the oikonomia. But “in which lives the fulness of divinity” (2.177) is a comment on the full divinity of Christ, which would be part of his ‘absolute’ nature.

Gregory is trying to maintain a balancing act: neither agreeing with Eunomius that names are God-given and correspond to the essence of things, nor asserting that they are completely arbitrary. In the words of Young,

Through the names and attributes revealed by God’s will, some grasp of and advance in understanding is made possible. The biblical narratives, read imaginatively rather than literally, but accorded an authority greater than the merely metaphorical, can become luminous of a divine reality beyond human expression. This is not so much allegorical as sacramental. (1997, 143-4)

Mosshammer draws attention to the way in which Gregory “describes the text of Scripture as a ‘veil’ for hidden meanings” (1990, 111):

The divine intention is hidden under the surface of the text, as it were by a screen (παραπετάσματι), as some commandment or story is set before the intelligent student. This is exactly the reason why the Apostle says that those who look to the bodily aspect of scripture have a veil (κάλυμμα) over their hearts, and are unable to see through to the glory of the spiritual law, being restrained by the veil covering the facial aspect of the lawgiver (2 Cor 3.13). (Eun. 3.5.9; GNO 2.163; Hall forthcoming)

Mosshammer comments,

This veil is not merely a cloak behind which deeper meanings hide, but the indispensable verbal medium through which unspeakable truths are spoken. This veil is the ‘body’ of Scripture. Gregory uses the same language in reference to the flesh of Christ – His earthly body is a veil for the Godhead dwelling therein. (1990, 111)

He refers to Against Eunomius 3,9.13, which talks of the rich young man coming to Jesus (Mt 19:16-22):

He was not a person able to open the curtains of the flesh (καταπέτασμα τῆς σαρκός) and discern the hidden depth (ἀδύντον) of his godhead. (GNO 2.268; Hall forthcoming)

This is tabernacle language. In the New Testament, καταπέτασμα always refers to the inner veil of the temple or tabernacle (Mt 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45; Heb 6:19, 9:3, 10:20). In Life of Moses, Gregory tends to use it in the plural (except when alluding to Hebrews 10:20 at 2.178):

There were curtains (καταπετάσματα) artistically woven of diverse colors; these brilliant colors were woven together to make a beautiful fabric. The curtains divided the tabernacle into two parts: the one visible and accessible to certain of the priests and the other secret and inaccessible (ἀδύντον καὶ ἄνεπιβατον). (2.172)
Douglass too “stresses the parallel in Gregory’s thought between Christ’s incarnation in the flesh and his incarnation/expression in language” (Ludlow 2007b, 238). Having described the Cappadocian understanding of the incarnation in terms of a metadiastemic intrusion (see 4.4.3), he uses the same concept to interpret their understanding of language: “What the reconstitution of the metadiastemic intrusion provided for the Cappadocians was the possibility that God could simultaneously inhabit language and still remain Other to language” (2005, 163). The same paradoxes recur: “Dimensional man’s ability to build a temple remains in tension with his inability to enter it. Language’s ability to reconstitute the metadiastemic intrusion of Christ stands in tension with its inability to speak into its silence” (2005, 159). Douglass stresses this concept of silence:

Language’s diastemic ability to reconstitute the metadiastemic intrusion of Christ set in motion for the Cappadocians a disseminated discourse indelibly marked by its epinoetic genesis. Never more than tangential to an impenetrable space, a place of silence, a saturated absence, an entirely other world of inaccessible essence, theological discourse extended language to its uttermost limit. (2005, 161)

Theological discourse proceeds by producing a collection of names:

The infinite and eternal silence, epiphanically inhabiting the diasteme while remaining other to it, generated in each of its visitations an infinite number of diastemic names – (non)names that could not name essentially. Since no single name could reconstitute the space of a metadiastemic intrusion, let alone enter it, the Cappadocians recognized the necessity of adapting a multiplicity of (in)appropriate names to Christ in order to gain, like Moses, an indirect glimpse of God. (2005, 174)

‘Tabernacle’ does not feature in Gregory’s other lists of divine names, nor is it among the many names discussed by Origen in Commentary on John. Gregory adds it in Life of Moses 2.177, with biblical support from John 1 and Colossians 1, in order to bolster his argument that the heavenly and earthly tabernacles were types of Christ. Mosshammer and Douglass, however, show that ‘tabernacle’ is more than another Johannine name alongside ‘shepherd’, ‘bread’, ‘vine’, ‘way’ etc. It encapsulates Gregory’s understanding both of the incarnation and of theological language. The holy of holies of the tabernacle, the incarnation, and theological discourse all contain the uncontainable – the fullness of divinity, without yet giving human beings access to the essence of that fullness. ‘Tabernacle’ is both a divine name, and a metaphor for all divine names. As such it relates to the oikonomia, to the ways in which the adiastemic God enters into relationship with creation. I would therefore suggest that Gregory’s phrase “in which lives the fulness of divinity” (2.177) refers to the fullness out of which
we have all received (John 1:16), the fullness present, yet inaccessible, in the tabernacle, the incarnation and theological speech.

4.5.4 Heavenly ascent context

Divine names are a prominent feature of the Hekhalot texts. As Elior writes,

Hekhalot literature conceives of the Divinity as a system of Holy Names woven about the Ineffable Name; the Ineffable Name itself is seen as inexplicable units of sound, embodying a supreme concentration of the divine power that created the Universe. In other words, the Ineffable Name transcends any linguistically defined meaning; it is the source of the essence, vitality and unity of Creation, the pivot of the mystical-theurgical knowledge associated with the being and oneness of Creation. (1997, 250)

Schäfer characterises Hekhalot literature as moving “between the two poles of the heavenly journey and the magical-theurgic adjuration” (1992, 150), with names playing a part in both ‘poles’: Knowledge of divine names enables both ascent/descent to the merkavah, and the conjuration of angels. Hekhalot Rabbati describes Neḥuniah ben ha-Qannah performing a heavenly ascent in front of his fellow scholars. He tells them:

When a man wants to descend to the Merkavah, he should call Suriya, the Prince of the Countenance, and conjure him a hundred and twelve times in the name of Tetrasii, Lord God ... He should neither add nor subtract from that number of a hundred and twelve, for if he does, he fatally endangers himself. His mouth should utter the names and his fingers should count a hundred and twelve, and he immediately descends and masters the Merkavah. (§204-5; Gruenwald 1980, 105)

On the dangerous journey, divine names are the passwords needed to overcome the fearsome angelic doorkeepers. As Swartz writes,

The secret to success is to possess elaborate divine names, often known as ‘seals’, which the traveller presents to the angelic guard, and to have esoteric knowledge of the heavenly topography and the names and characteristics of specific angels. If he presents these names successfully, the traveller is reassured that he has been expected and will be honoured by the heavenly hosts. (2006, 405)

But the divine name is highly dangerous, it is “enveloped in fire, flames of fire and hail” (Ma’aseh Merkavah §552; Swartz 1992, 230), and must not fall into the wrong hands. A text in Hekhalot Zuṭarti reworks Hillel’s dictum in m. Avot 1:13,63 and turns it into a “warning against the further transmission of esoteric knowledge” (Schäfer 1992, 71; cf. 2009, 292):

He used to say:
Who spreads [his] name, loses his name
and who does not learn, deserves death.
Who makes use of the crown, vanishes.
Who does not know QYNTMYS’, shall be put to death,

63 “One who makes his name great, loses his name; one who does not add, perishes. One who does not learn, is liable to death; one who makes use of the crown, passes away” (translated Schäfer 1992, 71 n.92).
and who knows QYNTMYS’, will be desired in the world to come.
(§360; Schäfer 1992, 71)

In Hekhalot Zuṭarti, Moses and ‘Aqiva perform ascents in order to obtain divine names which guard against forgetting the Torah:

When Moses ascended on high to God, the Holy One, blessed be he, taught him:
Anyone, whose heart goes astray,
recite over him these names, in the name of ... (nomina barbara follow),
so that everything that I see and hear will be grasped by my heart,
[namely] Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, Halakhot, and Haggadot,
so that I will never forget,
[not] in this world and not in the world to come. ...
This is the name, which was revealed to R. ‘Aqiva
when he observed the working of the Merkavah.
‘Aqiva [again] descended and taught it to his students.
He said to them:
My sons, handle this name carefully,
[for] it is a [great] name,
it is a holy name,
it is a pure name.
Because each one, who makes use of it in fright, in fear,
in purity, in holiness, in humility,
will multiply the seeds,
be successful in all his endeavours,
and his days shall be long. (§336-7; Schäfer 1992, 67-8)

In other texts, the names enable the Prince of the Torah to be summoned:

Rabbi Ishmael said: I asked Rabbi Nehuniah ben ha-Qannah: How is the wisdom of the Prince of the Torah [obtained]? He said to me: When you pray, pronounce the three names that the Angels of Glory pronounce: ZṢ ṬYṢ ZRZSY’L TYT TWPYLTY RBT YP’ ‘RḤR ZY’ ‘YZWZ, in power. And when you pray, pronounce at the end [of your prayer] the three letters that the Creatures pronounce when they gaze at and see 'RKS YWY God of Israel: GLY 'YY 'RDR YH’L ZK BBYB’. And when you say another prayer, pronounce the three letters that the wheels of the Merkavah pronounce when they recite song before the Throne of Glory: HṢ PZ YP’ HP Y’W GHW’ ‘SBYB’. This is the acquisition of wisdom; everyone who pronounces them acquires wisdom forever. (Ma’aseh Merkavah §564; Swartz 1992, 237)

Just as the climax of the liturgy in the temple had been the enunciation of the divine name, so too in heaven “the angelic hosts pronounce the names of God in their daily recitation of hymns and praises, and the pronouncement of The Name seems to be a central aspect of their devotions” (Elior 1989, 104). A particularly dramatic ceremony is described in one manuscript of Hekhalot Zuṭarti:

And that youth whose name is Metatron brings whispering fire and places it in the ears of the Hayyot, so that they should not hear the voice of the Holy One, blessed be He, speaking, and the Ineffable Name that the youth whose name is Metatron pronounces at that time in seven voices in the name of the Living and Pure and Venerated and Awesome …. YHWH, I am that I am, the Living, YHWH, YWAY, HKH HH WH HWH WHW HH HY HH HH YHY HYH YHY YHWH … this shall be my Name for ever, my appellation for all eternity. (§390; Elior 1997, 249)
Ma’aseh Merkavah is largely a collection of prayers with “a distinctly liturgical quality” (Swartz 2006, 409). Some of these centre around the divine name:

Your name is holy in the highest heavens;
high and exalted over all of the Cherubim.
Let your name be sanctified in Your holiness,
let it be magnified in Your greatness,
let it be strengthened in might,
and Your dominion to the end of all generations.
For Your might is forever and ever.
Blessed are You, YY, magnificent in strength, great in power.
§590; Swartz 1992, 246)

Schäfer comments that this and similar texts “often read like an explication of the liturgical response to the uttering of the tetragram: ‘Blessed be the name of the glory of his kingdom forever and ever’” (1992, 78-9). This signals the links between Hekhalot mysticism and not only temple liturgy, but also the ongoing synagogue liturgy. In talking of God in Hekhalot literature, Schäfer argues that “it is still the same God of Rabbinic Judaism who is the object of desire of the Merkavah mystic, but this God consists, so to speak, of names”. He says that “what Scholem has said on later manifestations of Jewish mysticism equally applies to Merkavah mysticism: ‘As such, the revelation is one of the name or names of God, which are perhaps the various modi of his active being. The language of God has no grammar. It consists only of names’” (1993, 76).

Grözinger insists that ‘name’ in the context of the Hekhalot texts “has a totally different connotation from what we mean by a ‘name’ in the modern social and legal sense” (1987, 54):

A name within the scope of Hekhalot-texts is not a simple appellation, nor a convention for the purpose of naming and recognizing persons, but ... a name itself is a venerable bearer of power, indeed, it is a hypostasis of inherent power and function. (1987, 58)

Divine names are assumed to have power, because they give access to the being of God. In this, there are parallels between ‘glory’ and ‘name’. Just as ‘glory’ is a visible manifestation of God, so the ‘name’ of God is an aural manifestation. These parallels go back to the Bible: When Moses asks to see the glory of God, God replies, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD’ (יהוה) ... But you cannot see my face ...” (Ex 33:19-20). In Exodus the tabernacle is the place of God’s glory (Ex 40:34), in Deuteronomy the central sanctuary is the place of God’s name (Deut 12:11). Weinfeld argues that “the difference in terminology reflects a conceptual difference. P thought of God in a more corporeal way ...
Deuteronomy thinks of God more abstractly”. He admits, however, that “both šēm and kāḇôḏ express semantically the majesty of sovereign divine power” (Weinfeld 1995, 37).

Turning back to the Hekhalot texts, there seems to be “a real resemblance, if not an identity, of God and His Name” (Grözinger 1987, 60):

- He is His name, and His name is He;
- He is in Him, and His name is in His name;
- Song is His name and His name is Song.

(\textit{Ma‘aseh Merkavah} §588; Swartz 1992, 244)

Grözinger goes as far as to suggest that “the God of these mystics is strictly speaking nothing else than the hypostasis of His own Name. He and His Name are one” (1987, 61). Just like glory, however, names can be dangerous, and they hide as well as reveal.

Names promise access, yet the long lists of unpronounceable, nonsensical combinations of letters seem to indicate rather the ungraspability of the divine.

4.5.5 Conclusions

The Hekhalot texts seem worlds away from Gregory. But maybe it is not as far as we think. Christians knew of Jewish scruples about pronouncing the divine name, hence Clement’s reference to the “mystic name of four letters” (\textit{Strom}. 5.34.5, see above).

Young argues that Christian understandings of God were influenced by Jewish ideas, particularly as transmitted by Hellenistic writers such as Philo and Josephus:

- It is the congruence of Platonic and Hellenistic-Jewish motifs which contributed to the Christian understanding of God. The fact that Jews never pronounced God’s name, never made images of him, and used scriptures which asserted that the greatest prophet of all had no direct confrontation with God, “for no one can see God and live”, undoubtedly contributed to this “negative” Jewish theology. Words emphasizing God’s otherness and incomparability seem to have been particularly characteristic of Hellenistic Judaism, and so entered Christian tradition: God is unapproachable (ἀπρόσιτος), untraceable (ἀνεξιχνίαστος) and inscrutable (ἀνεξερεύνητος); so he is incomprehensible (ἀκατάληπτος). Not surprisingly many of the terms of Hellenistic Judaism and of philosophy overlapped, and in Christian tradition they tended to be amalgamated, as previously in Philo, so as to point to a more ultimate transcendence than the mainstream Platonist tradition suggested. Thus God came to be regarded as beyond human understanding, as well as beyond human language. (1979a, 53)

This puts the emphasis on the positive influence of Hellenistic Jews who wrote using apophatic philosophical terms. Was Gregory also reacting to, and guarding against, suggestions that God could be reached by the use of the right names? He will not have known the Hekhalot texts, but he must have been familiar with the power widely attributed to divine names, commented on, after all, in Origen. Daniélou posits a link between Eunomius and contemporary neoplatonists via Aetius (1956b, 428), and it is not
farfetched to suggest that Gregory knew something of the ideas of Iamblichus and his disciples. But there is no need to argue that he was countering any one particular text or set of ideas. This section has highlighted the importance of names in the Late Antique world, and therefore placed Gregory’s debates with Eunomius into a much wider context.

In some Hekhalot texts the goal of heavenly ascent is to obtain divine names. And Gregory has turned Moses’ vision of the heavenly tabernacle into an understanding of a new name for God: ‘tabernacle’. But he insists that this is only one name among many, none of which give access to the essence of God. He accordingly plays down the importance of the high priest’s petalon: there is no one name which gives access to the holy of holies. Hekhalot literature, by contrast, ascribes great power to divine names, hinting that they provide access to the innermost chambers of heaven, and to the secrets of creation. And yet the multiplication of those names undercuts this suggestion of power. There clearly is no one all-powerful divine name to which human beings have access. Frenzied attempts are made to reach it, but the longer the lists of unintelligible letters become, the further away the goal seems. Paradoxically, the Hekhalot texts illustrate Gregory’s thesis: progress towards the divine is infinite, an ever-receding horizon.
4.6 Heavenly powers

The pillars gleaming with silver and gold, the bearing poles and rings, and those cherubim who hide the ark with their wings, and all the other things which are contained in the description of the tabernacle’s construction – all of these things, if one should turn his view to things above, are the heavenly powers (ὑπερκόσμιοι δύναμεις) which are contemplated in the tabernacle and which support the universe in accord with the divine will. (Vit. Moys. 2.179)

4.6.1 Life of Moses 2.178-183 and its biblical context

Having designated the heavenly tabernacle a type of Christ, Gregory argues that not only does Moses’ vision as a whole correspond to the name ‘tabernacle’, but that “each thing seen leads by the hand to the contemplation of a concept appropriate to God” (2.178). In order to decipher the meaning of the furniture, he turns to Colossians 1:16:

For (the Apostle) says somewhere with reference to the Only Begotten, whom we have perceived in place of the tabernacle, that in him were created all things, everything visible and invisible, whether thrones (δρόνοι), authorities (ἐξουσίαι), principalities (ἀρχαί), dominions (κυριότητες), or powers (δύναμεις). (2.179; Malherbe & Ferguson’s translation amended)

This enables him to interpret the contents of the tabernacle not cosmologically, or christologically, but ‘angelologically’. Daniélou points out that this personalises the Platonic world of ideas:

Les objets contenus dans le Tabernacle sont les réalités du monde céleste. Mais ce monde céleste n’est pas le monde des idées impersonnelles, des archétypes, mais celui des anges personnels. (2000, 225 n.2)

Since Gregory goes on to interpret the earthly tabernacle ecclesiologically, we are presented with a picture of Christ’s celestial tabernacle/body consisting of angels, and his earthly tabernacle/body consisting of the church. Gregory, however, does not draw attention to this parallelism. And he is not totally consistent in his angelological interpretation, correlating some of the furniture with angels, but some with Christ or the Spirit. He does not here maintain the strict boundary between uncreated and created one would expect from his doctrinal position.

Having made his general statement, Gregory goes on to examine some of the details. He characterises the heavenly powers as supporting the universe (τὸ πᾶν ὑπερείδουσαι), thus relating them to pillars. He moves on to the bearing poles and rings (ἀναφορεῖς καὶ δακτύλιοι). He has not mentioned these in either of his tabernacle descriptions (1.49-50, 2.170-172). He is referring to the carrying-poles which were
slipped through the rings attached to the sides of ark, and left there permanently (Ex 25:12-15), interpreting them as follows:

These are our true supports (ἀναφορεῖς), sent to help those who will be heirs of salvation. They are slipped through the souls of those being saved as through rings and by themselves raise to the height of virtue those lying upon the earth. (2.180)

He is quoting Hebrews 1:14, which speaks of ministering spirits being sent forth to serve. Earlier in the treatise, in the context of the brotherly assistance given to Moses by Aaron, he has said that God appoints “an angel with an incorporeal nature to help in the life of each person” (2.45). This good angel “by rational demonstration shows the benefits of virtue which are seen in hope by those who live aright” (2.46).

From the poles and rings of the ark, Gregory moves to the cherubim above it, saying that “we have learned that this is the name of those powers which we see around the divine nature (τῶν περὶ τήν θείαν φύσιν θεωρομένων δύναμεων), which powers Isaiah and Ezekiel perceived” (2.180). In To Theophilus, Against the Apollinarians, Gregory places Moses’ vision of the heavenly tabernacle in parallel to Elijah’s ascent to the ethereal region, Isaiah and Ezekiel’s visions of the throne of glory, and Paul’s entry into Paradise. In all these ascents, human beings glimpse the heavenly world and its angelic powers. This understanding enables him to conflate the cherubim of Exodus and Ezekiel with the seraphim of Isaiah. Such conflation was commonplace, especially in liturgy, as Jerome testifies with a complaint:

The mistake – although a pious one – of those also is to be reprehended who in their prayers and oblations venture to say: “Thou that sittest above the cherubim and the seraphim.” For it is written that God sits above the cherubim ... but no Scripture states that God sits above the seraphim ... (Epist. 18B.1; Mierow 1963, 97-8)

Indeed the conflation starts in the New Testament: the living creatures of Revelation 4:6-11 fuse Isaiah’s seraphim with Ezekiel’s cherubim. Gregory includes the cherubimseraphim amongst the heavenly powers. In Against Eunomius 1 he argues against those who suggest that they are to be reckoned above creation, or on a par with the Holy Spirit, saying that in Colossians 1:16 Paul includes the cherubim under ‘thrones’, and the seraphim under ‘powers’ (Eun. 1.306-13; GNO 1.117-9; cf. Ref. Eun. 196; GNO 2.395). But elsewhere in his works the phrase ‘around the divine nature’

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64 See quote in 4.1.3.

65 The list in Col 1:16 does not in fact include ‘powers’. In Eun. 1.307 Gregory gives the contents of that list correctly (although in a different order); but in Eun. 1.313 and Ref. Eun. 196, as in Vit. Moys. 2.179, he adds ‘powers’, presumably on the basis of Eph 1:21: “... above all rule (ἀρχῆς) and authority (ἐξουσίας) and power (δυνάμεως) and dominion (κυριότητος) ...”.
(περὶ τῆν θείαν φύσιν) denotes “all that is manifest in God, all his potentially self-disclosing attributes, that is the fullness of his positive perfections” (Harrison 1992b, 47). For example, in *To Ablabius: On Not Three Gods* he says,

> We ... have learned that (the divine) nature is unnameable and unspeakable, and we say that every name either invented by the custom of men, or handed down to us by the Scriptures, is indeed explanatory of the things contemplated around the divine nature (τῶν περὶ τῆν θείαν φύσιν νοουμένων), but does not include the signification of that nature itself. (GNO 3,1.42-3; Harrison 1992b, 46)

In *Life of Moses*, the word ‘powers’ has been added to the phrase ‘around the divine nature’; but even so, the impression is given that the cherubim, though created, are very close to the divine mystery. The cherubim of Exodus 25:18-22 cover the ark of the testimony with their wings. The LXX translates the description of the seraphim’s wings in Isaiah 6:2 as:

> ... with two they covered the face (τὸ πρόσωπον), and with two they covered the feet (τοὺς πόδας), and with two they flew.

Whose face and feet are being referred to? Early Christian writers assumed that the face and feet of God were being shielded from view. Gregory is thus able to equate the ark with the face of God:

> The same thing is called the ark of the covenant in one place and in the other place the Face (πρόσωπον); in the one the ark is covered by the wings, in the other the Face is. It is as though one thing is perceived in both, which suggests to me the incomprehensibility of contemplating the ineffable secrets. (2.180 Daniélou 2000, 227; 2.181 Malherbe & Ferguson 1978, 100)

The word πρόσωπον, however, is not only the Greek translation of the Hebrew יְאֹנִי, it carries theological resonance. The Cappadocians developed a Trinitarian terminology (which became the orthodox norm) of one divine οὐσία and three ὑποστάσεις or πρόσωπα. Gregory writes:

> Just as, because the Father differs from both the Son and the Holy Spirit, we say that there are three persons (πρόσωπα) – of Father and Son and Holy Spirit – thus, because Father does not differ from Son and Holy Spirit according to the substance (κατὰ τὴν οὐσίαν), we say that the substance (τὴν οὐσίαν) of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit is one. (Graec.; GNO 3,1.21; Duvick 2008)

So the ark/Face – the ineffable secrets (τῶν ἀπορρήτων) – covered by the wings of the cherubim/seraphim represents the person of Christ. In *Refutation of the Confession of Faith of Eunomius*, however, Gregory insists that Isaiah’s vision, along with “every specially divine vision, every theophany, every word uttered in the Person of God, is to be understood to refer to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (*Ref. Eun.* 193; GNO

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^66 See Origen *Against Celsus* 6.18, or Jerome *Letter* 18A.7.
2.394; NPNF² 5.129). So although his interpretation of the ark focuses on the person of Christ, in line with the heavenly tabernacle as a type of Christ, the ineffable secrets are common to all three divine persons.

Exodus 25:31-39 contains a detailed, if somewhat obscure, description of the seven-branched candlestick which was to stand in the holy place, just outside the holy of holies (Ex 26:35). Nowhere does Gregory mention its placement; but he describes it as solid gold, “a candlestick with a single base, divided at its top into seven branches, each supporting a lamp” (2.171). He interprets it in terms of the Holy Spirit:

And if you should hear about lamps which have many branches coming out of one candlestick so that a full and brilliant light is cast all around, you would correctly conclude that they are the varied rays of the Spirit which shine brightly in this tabernacle. This is what Isaiah is speaking about when he divides the lights of the Spirit into seven. (2.181)

He has turned the “seven eyes” of Zechariah 4:10, and the “seven spirits” of Revelation 4:5 and 5:6, into attributes of the one Spirit, thanks to Isaiah 11:2-3 (LXX: “And the spirit of God shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and godliness. The spirit of the fear of God will fill him.”). Malherbe and Ferguson comment,

In view of Gregory’s role in establishing the deity of the Holy Spirit in the doctrinal controversies of the time, it is striking that the Holy Spirit appears so seldom (in Life of Moses) and then never in a strictly theological context. The Holy Spirit was the means of the incarnation (II, 216), and now “grace … flourishes through the Spirit” (II, 187). Gregory commends those before him who interpreted the cloud that led the Israelites as the Holy Spirit (II, 121), and he considers the lamps in the tabernacle to represent the rays of the Spirit (II, 181). (1978, 15-16)

If the ark represents the person of Christ, then to make the candlestick, which stands outside the holy of holies, represent the Holy Spirit seems to contradict Gregory’s insistence on equality between the persons of the Trinity. But the equation of the Holy Spirit with light does tie in with his Trinitarian theology:

For since it is said their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven (Mt 18.10) and it is not possible to behold the hypostasis of the Father otherwise than by fixing the gaze upon it through his impress, and the impress of the hypostasis (Heb 1.3) of the Father is the Only-begotten (Jn 1.14,18), and again

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² He interprets Isaiah 6 in the light of John 12:41 and Acts 28:25-27. Didymus the Blind was the first to bring these passages together in order to prove that the seraphim were worshipping the Trinity. This was to counter Origen’s interpretation of the seraphim as Christ and the Holy Spirit. See Chavoutier (1960, 11-12).
no-one can draw near whose mind has not been illumined (καταυγασθείς) by the Holy Spirit ... (Eust.; GNO 3.1 13; Silvas 2007, 243)

It is by the light of the Spirit that Christians draw near to Christ.

From the candlestick, Gregory moves on to the mercy-seat (τὸ τήρον; ἱλαστήριον).

Here Romans 3:25 supplies the interpretation:

The throne of mercy, I think, needs no interpretation since the Apostle laid bare what is hidden when he said, Whom God has appointed to be a throne of mercy for our souls. (2.182)

Gregory does not expand further. If the ark represents Christ, then it makes sense that its cover should represent the reconciliation he effected on humanity’s behalf. But, as with his earlier allusion to Hebrews 1:14, one gets the impression that Gregory is trying to shoehorn New Testament verses, and their traditional interpretations, into his new interpretation of the tabernacle. It means that the passion becomes part of the incomprehensible, ineffable mystery, shielded by the cherubim’s wings.

The altar of offering (θυσιαστήριον) and the altar of incense (θυμιατήριον) suggest to Gregory “the adoration of the heavenly beings which is perpetually offered in this tabernacle” (2.182). This will be looked at further in 4.8.

Gregory’s last section on the heavenly tabernacle concerns the “skin dyed red (δέρμα πεφοινιγμένον βαφῇ) and hair woven (τρίχες ἐξυφανθεῖσαι)” (2.183). The materials for the construction of the tabernacle, listed in Ex 25:3-7, include goats’ hair (τρίχας αἰγείας) and rams’ skins dyed red (θύρματα κριῶν ἠρυθρόδανωμένα). The tabernacle was to have three coverings: the first made of multicoloured cloth with cherubim woven into it (Ex 26:1), the second of goats’ hair (τρίχας αἰγείας) and rams’ skins dyed red (θύρματα κριῶν ἠρυθρόδανωμένα), and the third of red rams’ skins, together with the enigmatic ערת תחשׁים (RSV: goatskins; JPS: dolphin skins), which the LXX translates as blue skins (δέρματα ὑακίνθινα) (Ex 26:14). Gregory interprets the red skins and woven hair as “the saving Passion there predetermined”:

It is signified in both of the elements mentioned: the redness pointing to the blood and the hair to death. Hair on the body has no feeling; hence it is rightly a symbol of death. (2.183)

Sivas (2007, 243 n.102) argues that this τούτῳ refers to the Father. Duvick’s translation (2008) assumes that it refers to the Son.
He has therefore made the passion part of the eternal, heavenly Christ. It is not entirely clear, however, how this fits either with the angelological interpretation of the tabernacle, or with the redemption symbolised by the mercy-seat.

4.6.2 Alexandrian context

Within his overall cosmological interpretation of the tabernacle, Philo distinguishes between the realm of sense (αἰσθητά) and the realm of mind (νοητά), although he is not altogether consistent about where the dividing line comes. Sometimes he interprets the tabernacle tent (comprising both the holy of holies and its forecourt) as the realm of mind, with the outside court as the realm of sense (Mos. 2.81, cf. Ebr. 134); and sometimes only the holy of holies, or the ark within it, is the incorporeal, intelligible world (Q.E. 2.69, 83, 94). As Koester notes, “in Mos. 2.101-108, the furnishings of the forecourt correspond to heaven, earth, and sea, which are presumably in the realm of sense” (1989, 61). It is with his interpretation of the contents of the holy of holies that Philo indulges in speculation on the heavenly powers. He is particularly interested in cherubim, discussing them in seven of his treatises. He offers an etymology of the word ‘cherubim’ (recognition and full knowledge – ἐπίγνωσις καὶ ἐπιστήμη πολλή, Mos. 2.97), and several alternative explanations of their symbolism. In On Moses 2.98 he interprets them cosmologically as “symbols of the two hemispheres, one above the earth and one under it, for the whole heaven has wings”. He goes on to say,

I should myself say that they are allegorical representations of the two most august and highest potencies (δυνάμεις) of Him that is, the creative and the kingly (ποιητικήν καὶ βασιλικήν). (Mos. 2.99)

In Questions on Exodus 2.68 and On Flight and Finding 100-1 he comments on Exodus 25:22 (“I will speak to you (λαλήσω σοι) from above the mercy-seat between the two cherubim”), introducing a whole hierarchy of powers into the holy of holies, which bridge the gap between God (ὁ ὄν or τὸ ὄν) and the world of Platonic ideas:

… if you make the beginning from the upper end, (you will find) the Speaker (τὸν λέγοντα) first, and the Logos (τὸν λόγον) second, and the creative power (τὴν ποιητικὴν δύναμιν) third, and the ruling (power) (τὴν ἀρχήν) fourth, and then, below the creative, the beneficent (power) (τὴν ἐυεργέτην) fifth, and, below the royal, the punitive (power) (τὴν κολαστήριον) sixth, and the world of ideas (τὸν ἐκ τῶν ἰδεῶν κόσμον) seventh. (QE 2.68; cf. Fug. 100-1)


He describes these powers in terms of a chariot, alluding both to the chariot in Plato’s *Phaedrus* and to the biblical imagery of the cherubim as God’s chariot. He interprets λαλήσω σοι as referring to God’s communication with the Logos:

… while the Word is the charioteer of the Powers (ἡνίοχον τῶν δυνάμεων), He who talks is seated in the chariot, giving directions to the charioteer for the right wielding of the reins of the Universe. (Fug. 101)

As described in 4.4.2, the Logos appears in a variety of guises in Philo’s allegorisation of the tabernacle, including as the central branch of the candlestick (*Her.* 216, 225). But since the holy of holies represents God’s presence, and human access to that presence, it makes sense that the ark, the cherubim, and God speaking from above them enable Philo to set out his vision of how the Logos and its powers mediate between the transcendent God and the created world. For as he says,

The most lucid and most prophetic mind receives the knowledge and science of the Existent One not from the Existent One Himself, for it will not contain His greatness, but from his chief and ministering powers. (*QE* 2.67)

Like Philo, Clement correlates the layout of the temple/tabernacle with the division between the sensible and the noetic world. For him this also symbolises the different categories of Christian believer. He gives a couple of interpretations of the intermediate space, accessible to priests, between the outer covering (κάλυμμα) and the veil (παραπέτασμα):

… they say that this is the middlemost point of heaven and earth. But others say it is the symbol of the intellectual and sensible world. (*Strom.* 5.33.2; van den Hoek 1988, 122)

Of the lampstand standing in this intermediate space, he starts off by saying that it shows “the motions of the seven light-bearing stars (φωσφόρων)” (*Strom.* 5.34.8-9; van den Hoek 1988, 128; cf. Philo *Mos.* 2.102), but then adds:

The golden candlestick has another enigma of the sign of Christ, not only by its form but also by its casting light at many times and in many ways on those who believe and hope in him and look at him through the service of the first-created beings (τῶν πρωτοκτίστων).

And they say that the seven eyes of the Lord are the seven spirits resting on the rod that springs from the root of Jesse. (*Strom.* 5.35.1-2; van den Hoek 1988, 128)

The seven first-created beings also appear in *Excerpts from Theodotus* 10-12, chapters attributed to Clement: (The Seven) have received perfection from the beginning, at the time of the first creation from God through the Son. ... they “always behold the face of the Father”

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71 See 4.1.2.

72 See Sagnard (1948, 8, 12).
and the face of the Father is the Son, through whom the Father is known. ... they see not with an eye of sense, but with the eye of mind, such as the Father provided. (Exc. 10; Casey 1934, 49).

In the Miscellanies they are linked to the candlestick thanks to the “seven eyes” of Zechariah 2:10, the “seven spirits” from Revelation 4:5 and 5:6, and “the rod that springs from the root of Jesse” from Isaiah 11:1. Their presence in the intermediate space is probably best seen as a foretaste of what is behind the veil. For there is the “intellectual world” (νοητὸς κόσμος, Strom. 5.34.7), which is also the angelic world. According to Excerpts from Theodotus 27, it is when the soul enters behind the second veil that it “passes into the spiritual realm and becomes now truly rational and high priestly, so that it might now be animated, so to speak, directly by the Logos, just as the archangels became the high-priests of the angels, and the First-Created the high-priests of the archangels” (Exc. 27; Casey 1934, 61).

In the holy of holies are the ark and the cherubim. Clement gives several interpretations for each of these, reflecting a variety of source material. The ark might signify “the eighth region (ϐυγδος) and the world of thought (νοητὸς κόσμος)”, or “God, all-embracing, and without shape, and invisible”, or “the repose (ἀνάπαυσιν) which dwells with the adoring spirits, which are meant by the cherubim” (Strom. 5.36.3; Le Boulluec 1981, 1.85; Wilson 1869, 242). These at least are not mutually incompatible. When it comes to the cherubim, he “chops his (picture) up with manifold alternative interpretations, sometimes contradicting himself in the process” (van den Hoek 1988, 133). In Miscellanies 5.35.6-7 he connects them with the world of sense:

Indeed, those golden figures, each of them with six wings, signify either the constellations of the two Bears, as some will have it, or rather the two hemispheres. And the name cherubim meant ‘much knowledge’.

But both together have twelve wings and by zodiac and by time, which moves on it, point to the world of sense. (van den Hoek 1988, 130)

In the next paragraph they are identified with the noetic realm:

But the face is a symbol of the rational soul (λογικῆς ψυχῆς), and the wings are the lofty ministers and energies of powers right and left (λειτουργίαι τε καὶ ἐνέργειαι αἱ μετάρσιοι δεξιῶν τε ἀμα καὶ λαιῶν δυνάμεων); and the voice is delightsome glory in ceaseless contemplation (δόξα εὐχάριστος ἐν ἀκαταπαύστῳ θεωρίᾳ). (Strom. 5.36.4; Le Boulluec 1981, 1.85; Wilson 1869, 242-3)

We see the influence of Philo in the mention of the two hemispheres and in the etymology. But Clement obviously has other sources of cosmological information. He goes on to quote from a tragedy he attributes to Euripides (now reattributed to Critias),
which mentions the twin bears.\textsuperscript{73} When it comes to the noetic realm, the wings of the cherubim represent the service and activities of “powers right and left”. These are not Philo’s two chief powers, representing divine activity in the cosmos. On the basis of an Armenian fragment, Le Boulluec (1981, 2.151) identifies them as angels of judgement: those on the left expel people who persevere in doing evil, while those on the right embrace the penitent. Runia points out, however, that

The basic opposition between punishment and beneficence is the same as we find in the Philonic doctrine of the powers, especially in \textit{QE} 2.68, where the merciful power is introduced as subordinate to the beneficent power and the punitive power as subordinate to the ruling power. (2004, 263)

Despite the confusion, and the piling up of interpretations, the key phrases in Clement’s interpretation of the ark and the cherubim would seem to be “the repose which dwells with the adoring spirits” and “delightsome glory in ceaseless contemplation”. These tie in with his description of the high priest entering the holy of holies.

Heavenly powers do not play a major role in Origen’s interpretations of the tabernacle. In \textit{Homilies on Numbers} 5, in the context of the tabernacle being carried on the shoulders (Num 7:9), he refers both to Psalm 91:11-12 (“For he will give his angels charge of you ... On their hands they will bear you up ...”) and Hebrews 1:14, in order to justify his interpretation that the saints are being carried by angels towards the promised land (\textit{Hom. Num.} 5.3.3; Doutreleau 1996-2001, 1.134-5). In \textit{Commentary on Romans}, whilst dealing with Romans 3:25, he interprets the mercy-seat as the soul of Jesus, and the cherubim as the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. He gives two interpretations of the ark: it is either the holy flesh of Jesus, or else “the heavenly powers (uirtutes caelestes)”. For “they too are capable of containing the Word of God and the Holy Spirit; but the soul of Jesus is placed before them, and by his mediation, as it were, they receive the divinely bestowed grace” (\textit{Comm. Rom.} 3.8.7; Hammond Bammel 1990-1998, 1.241-2; Scheck 2001, 221).

Gregory, therefore, was not the first interpreter to think of the tabernacle furniture as representing heavenly powers. The correlation of the layout of the tabernacle with the cosmos naturally led to the holy of holies being seen as symbolic of the noetic world. It was also an obvious move to correlate the cherubim of the tabernacle with other biblical cherubim, and with the seraphim of Isaiah. However, the term ‘powers’ is imprecise. It means different things to different writers. For Philo, the creative and kingly powers

\textsuperscript{73} See Le Boulluec (1981, 2.147-8).
(with the gracious and punitive powers below them) are a way of describing God’s action in the world. Clement talks of powers which seem to be angels of judgement. Gregory himself uses ‘powers’ both as a collective term for all heavenly beings, and to refer to one particular kind of spiritual being. In the singular, ‘power’ can refer to Christ (Vit. Moys. 2.174, 177). There are also inconsistencies in interpretations of the layout of the tabernacle. The symbolism of the seven-branched candlestick, which was in the holy place, not the holy of holies, fluctuates, even within the same author, between a representation of the physical universe, and an intimation of something higher. Thus for Philo it is both “a copy of the march of the choir of the seven planets” (Her. 221 cf. Mos. 2.102-3) and a representation of the soul, in which the main stalk represents “the holy and divine Word, the All-severer” (Her. 225). Clement brings in the seven planets, the shape of the cross, the light of Christ and the seven ‘first-created beings’. The cherubim too, within the holy of holies, are subjected to multiple interpretations: they are the two hemispheres of the cosmos (Philo, Clement), powers representing divine activity (Philo), angelic powers engaged in ceaseless adoration (Clement), and symbols of the Son and the Spirit (Origen). Gregory has therefore inherited a number of traditions relating the tabernacle to heavenly powers, but with no consistency between them. Some of his interpretations bear some relationship to those of his predecessors: Like Origen, he quotes Hebrews 1:14, referring to the support given by angelic spirits, and uses Romans 3:25 in interpreting the mercy-seat. Like Clement, he refers to Isaiah 11:1-3 when discussing the candlestick. He may have been influenced by these predecessors, or he may have arrived at his supporting biblical references independently. He himself shows a lack of consistency, especially in interpreting the candlestick as the Holy Spirit, and in referring to the cherubim as “around the divine nature”, a phrase he usually reserves for divine attributes. Where he is original is in using Colossians 1:16 to tie together a christological interpretation of the tabernacle as a whole with an angelological interpretation of some its furniture.

Gregory’s image of a heavenly tabernacle composed of angels, when placed in its christological context, creates a parallelism between an angelic body of Christ and the church – the earthly body of Christ. Others before him had produced heavenly/earthly church dualisms. The Valentinians made ‘Church’ one of the eight aeons of the ‘principal Ogdoad’ (Irenaeus Haer. 1.1.1). Origen speaks disparagingly of “some who speak of a certain heavenly Church, and say that the church on earth is an emanation from a higher world” (Cels. 6.35; Chadwick 1980, 351). But he himself develops the idea of two churches. In Homilies on Numbers 3.3 he quotes Hebrews 12:22-3 (“you
have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven …”), giving the impression that the heavenly church is an angelic one. Elsewhere he identifies the heavenly church with the elect of the earthly church: “The empirical church includes many who are not truly members of the church, but the heavenly church is comprised only of the perfect believers, those who are truly united with the Logos” (Rusch 2004, 79). This church has existed “from the beginning of the human race and from the very foundation of the world – indeed, if I may look for the origin of this high mystery under Paul’s guidance, even before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4)” (Comm. Cant. 2.8; Lawson 1957, 149). With its background in ‘heretical’ groups such as the Valentinians, it is not surprising that Gregory does not make explicit reference to a heavenly church. But the parallelism he creates between earthly and heavenly worship will be explored further in 4.8.

4.6.3 Theological context

Where do angels fit into Gregory’s thinking? Daniélou argues that Gregory’s cosmology consists of three heavens: the realm of air, containing wind, clouds and birds; the realm of ether, including the stars (together these make up the sense-perceptible heavens); and the noetic world, beyond which lies the darkness of the incomprehensible God (1954, 156). Gregory, however, replaces the Platonic κόσμος νοητός with the world of angels:

Le monde réel pour Grégoire, c’est (le plérôme des créatures spirituelles), composé des cent mondes angéliques. C’est cela qui remplace chez lui le monde inteligible de Platon, comme constituent le monde réel, par opposition à l’illusion cosmique, mais en même temps comme un monde créé qui s’oppose radicalement à Dieu.

(Daniélou 1954, 162)

Balás agrees: “In Gregory of Nyssa the ‘intelligible’ or ‘intellectual beings’ do not designate divine ideas – of which there are only a very few traces in his writings – but spiritual subjects, especially the angels and human souls” (1966, 35-36). Angels are intelligible, immaterial, spiritual beings, but they are created and, like human beings, have no access to the essence of God:

God ... can be grasped neither by any name nor by any thought nor any other conception, remaining lofter than the grasp of not only human beings, but even angelic and every supramundane being. (Eun. 1.683; GNO 1.222; Lim 1995, 157)

Von Balthasar analyses Gregory’s appropriation of his Platonic heritage slightly differently, arguing that he splits the Platonic realm of nous into three: “Its formally

74 See On Infants’ Early Deaths (GNO 3.2.78-9; NPNF² 5.375).
Our true home is in the third heaven. Daniélou picks up on von Balthasar’s analysis when he says, “c’est une même chose pour Grégoire que de rentrer dans la société des Anges, de restaurer en soi l’image de Dieu, de connaître Dieu par participation” (1954, 161). The third heaven has a divine aspect, a psychological aspect and an angelic aspect. Gregory talks of his sister Macrina both as having “secretly nourished in the depths of her soul” “the divine and pure love of the unseen Bridegroom” (Macr.; GNO 8,1.396; Callahan 1967, 179) and as living an “angelic and celestial life” (GNO 8,1.387; Callahan 1967, 174). Daniélou is keen to stress, however, the distinction between God’s incommunicable essence and God’s ἐνέργειαι, within which human beings can participate:

Or le κόσμος νοητός, par opposition à l’οὐσία, c’est précisément le domaine de la participation de Dieu par la grâce déifiante, qui est identique avec l’image de Dieu dans l’âme et qui constitue l’état angélique. (1954, 161)

In his three stage analysis of Gregory’s mysticism (light, cloud, darkness), it is stage two, θεωρία, which involves entering into the angelic world. Darkness is a stage further:

Au delà, nous entrons, hors des voies de la contemplation, dans la quête de l’âme à la recherche de son Bien-Aimé. Elle dépasse alors la sphère des anges et s’enfonce dans les profondeurs de la participation à la vie divine. C’est l’ordre de l’amour, la ténèbre au sens fort … (1954, 161)

Daniélou assigns the vision of the tabernacle to theoria, because it represents “le plérôme des créatures spirituelles entourant le Logos” (1954, 163). He interprets the τὰ θντα in Gregory’s phrase “the power which encompasses the universe (ἡ περιεκτικὴ τῶν θντων δύναμις)” (2.177) as referring to angels, “formes personnelles des idées” (1954, 164 n.1). The heavenly powers make up the celestial world. “Ils forment le sanctuaire de Dieu” (1954, 164). This still leaves unclear exactly what Gregory means when he says that the heavenly powers were created in Christ. Is there a remnant here of the Middle Platonist conception of the ideas being in the divine mind (cf. Philo Opif. 20, 36)? Daniélou firmly places the tabernacle within his theoria stage, and yet Gregory
characterises it as τὰ ἄδυτα, containing within it the ἄδυτον of the holy of holies. This is the vocabulary of Daniélou’s third stage:

Normalement l’ἄδυτον apparaîtra-t-il avec la troisième voie, comme le lieu où se consomme l’union de l’âme avec Dieu et où l’âme contemple Dieu dans la ténèbre. (1954, 185)

Although Gregory is known for placing an unbridgeable gap between the Creator and creation, he brings the two together in his tabernacle interpretation, and the gap is not always clear. In trying to reconcile his new understanding of the tabernacle as a type of Christ with an older tradition of interpreting the individual pieces of furniture he produces inconsistencies.

4.6.4 Heavenly ascent context

Gregory relates heavenly powers to the furniture of the tabernacle. Are there any parallels in heavenly ascent texts? The place to start is Ezekiel 1, the prophet’s vision of God’s mobile throne. The bearers of the throne are termed חיות – ‘living creatures’; but later (10:20) they are identified as cherubim, thus connecting the inanimate cherubim of the temple with the living carriers of God’s throne. Levenson sees a similar move in Isaiah 6:

Isaiah witnesses the transformation of glyptic symbols into full reality; the art of the Temple comes alive. (1984, 289)

Associated with the living creatures of Ezekiel 1 are אופנים: mysterious wheels, their rims covered in eyes. These too come to be seen as alive. In later texts ḥayyot, cherubim, and ’ophannim are independent orders of angels:

… from the sound of the harp playing of his ḥayyot,
from the rejoicing sound of the tambourine of his Ophannim
[and] from the sound of the cymbal playing of his Keruvim
there rises a sound … (Hekhalot Rabbati §161; Schäfer 1992, 25)

Halperin suggests that the process begins in Ezekiel 10:9-17. He argues that the subject of verses 11 and 12 is not, as usually assumed, the ḥayyot-cherubim, but the ’ophannim, and therefore that they have been equipped with heads, flesh, arms and wings (1988b, 45-6). The merkavah is a living structure, composed of angels.

Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice features the living, moving merkavah participating in the worship:

In the tabernacle… knowledge, the [cheru]bim fall before him and b[le]ss as they rise. A sound of divine stillness
[is heard] and (there is) a tumult of exultation as their wings lift up, the sound of divine [stillness]. The form of the chariot throne do they bless, (which is) above the firmament of the cherubim.

[And (in) the majesty of the luminous firmament do they exult, (which is) beneath his glorious seat. And when the ophannim move, the holy angels return. They go out <> from between its glorious hubs.]

(Song 12.2-5; 4Q405 20-22 ii 7-10; Charlesworth & Newsom 1999, 183)

In the Hekhalot literature too, God’s throne comes to life and joins in the praise:

Rejoice, rejoice, supernal dwelling!
Shout, shout for joy, precious vessel!
Made marvelously and a marvel!
Gladden, gladden the king who sits upon you!

(Hekhalot Rabbati §94; Schäfer 1992, 13)

Sabbath Songs seems to extend this idea of a living structure to the whole heavenly temple. In Song 7, after exhorting the angels to praise, the text turns to architectural elements:

With these let all foundations of holyies praise, the uplifting pillars of the supremely lofty abode, and all the corners of its structure.

(Song 7.12; 4Q403 1 i 41; Charlesworth & Newsom 1999, 163)

A little further on we find:

And all the decorations of the inner room make haste with wondrous psalms in the inner room …

wonder, inner room (דביר) to inner room with the sound of holy tumult. And all their decorations […]

And the chariots of his inner room give praise together, and their cherubim and their ophannim bless wondrously […]

(Song 7.36-38; 4Q403 1 ii 13-15; Charlesworth & Newsom 1999, 167)

Once again the building is participating in praise. There are a plurality of markavot, in line with the plurality of devirim. Maybe there is one markavah in each devir, or maybe the markavot “have become a class of heavenly beings present in large numbers in each of the debirim” (Newsom 1985, 237). Morray-Jones suggests that the author of Sabbath Songs has associated דביר (inner room) with דבר (to speak), so that the phrase ‘inner room to inner room with the sound of holy tumult’ “implies that the courts or sanctuaries of the temple are formed by the ‘utterances’ of the angels and the worshipping community and that the heavenly temple is conceived as a structure composed of living sound” (2006, 167).

Boustan points out that the ‘angelification’ of the celestial Temple” (2004, 196) is achieved not only by transferring “the verbs of praise so central to the liturgical
framework from angelic host to celestial architecture”, but also by portraying “the angelic creatures in material terms as images inscribed, carved, or woven into the Temple’s walls, furnishings and tapestries” (2004, 197), as in this fragment, assigned to song 9:

[And the likeness]ss of the living godlike beings is engraved in the vestibules where the king enters, figures of luminous spirit [...k]ing, figures of glorious light spirits of [... in the] midst of spirits of splendour, works of wondrous mingled colors, figures of living godlike beings [...] glorious inner rooms, the structure of [... the sanctuary of holiest holiness in the inner rooms of the king, figure[s of godlike beings; and from] the likeness of [...] holiest holiness

(Song 9.14-16; 4Q405 14-15 i 5-7; Charlesworth & Newsom 1999, 175)

Alexander says of Song 9,

Though the language is concrete (note the reference to the ‘glorious brickwork’ at 11Q 6-8 5), the architectural features are spiritualized. Engraved on them are images of angels. The motif is borrowed from Ezekiel’s visionary temple (Ezek. 41.15-26), and ultimately from Solomon’s temple (1 Kgs 6.29-35). The difference is that here the figures are not mere decoration: the images of the angels are animate and praise God. (2006a, 34)

In Song 7, the animate temple not only participates in the praise, it also seems to become its object:

Sing praise (to) God who is dreadful (in) power [...] knowledge and light to lift up (למען) together the splendidly shining firmament of [his] holy sanctuary. [...]god[like] spirits, to confess[s]s forever (and) ever the firmament of the uppermost heights, all [its] beams and its walls, all its structure, the works of its room. The spirits of holiest holiness, the living godlike beings

(Song 7.12-15; 4Q403 1 i 41-4, 4Q405 6 2-5; Charlesworth & Newsom 1999, 163)

Alexander translates למען as ‘to bear up’, so that “the praises create the temple”. “The purpose of the angelic liturgy is to ‘raise’ the temple of God” (Alexander 2006a, 30). This is in line with Morray-Jones’ suggestion of a structure composed of living sound. But if למען is taken in the metaphorical sense of ‘to exalt’, the temple becomes the object of praise. Anderson argues that just as there is confusion between the angelic beings, regularly called אלהים, and God, so the temple is ascribed divine qualities:

Hebrew constructions such as elohim hayyim (“the living God”) that one would normally construe as divine titles now become attributes of the supernal temple (“a living pulsating godlike [building]”). (2009, 170)
This is part of a wider proposal: that “the furniture of the temple was treated as quasi-divine in Second Temple Jewish sources of both a literary and iconographic nature” (2009, 162). However, he pushes the evidence too far, both in the case of Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, which describes the heavenly temple, and in the case of his other examples, which deal with the earthly temple. It is one thing to say that temple furniture shares in the holiness of God, and therefore should be treated with the utmost reverence (cf. Num 4:20), or even that the cherubim “are, in some real sense, representations of God’s true presence in the temple” (Anderson 2009, 177), and quite another to say that “seeing the furniture is analogous to seeing the very being of God” (2009, 166), or “it is not possible to divide or separate fully the being of God from the objects he inhabits” (2009, 188). As regards Sabbath Songs, Alexander is adamant that despite the use of 'Elohim for both, the “authors evince a deep consciousness of the difference between God and the angels”: “God is the source of all knowledge; the angels know only what he chooses to reveal to them” (2006a, 105). Sabbath Songs preserves “a profound sense of the ultimate transcendence and mystery of God” (2006a, 106), as evinced by its strategy of displacement: there is no direct visualisation of God; attention is transferred instead to the angels and the heavenly temple.

Anderson’s analysis, however, does illustrate what a fine line is trod when associating God’s presence with the temple/tabernacle and its furniture. Texts which describe the earthly temple have to negotiate the relationship between God’s immanence and God’s transcendence. Texts which deal with the heavenly temple have to maintain a boundary between God and angels. But sometimes the language slips. It does so in the Hekhalot literature, as Lesses notes:

The ascent account in Hekhalot Zutarti, which gives instructions for the journey through the seven Hekhalot to the lap of God, reveals in a particularly acute way the confusion between God and the highest angelic princes that one often finds in the hekhalot texts. This text elides the differences between God and the angels, both by giving God multiple names, and by compounding the names of God and the angels with the tetragrammaton. (1998, 257)

4.6.5 Conclusions

In both Life of Moses and Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice the heavenly temple is not a material entity. Gregory, with his Platonic background, sees it as an ideal form, an archetype. That makes it not less real but more so: the reality of which material things are but a copy. And he links it with Christ, again giving it more presence not less. But if the heavenly tabernacle is not material, what is it made of? Both Life of Moses and
*Sabbath Songs* seem to suggest that it is made of angels, of heavenly powers. They arrive at this conclusion, however, by different routes. Gregory uses Colossians 1:16 to personalise Platonic ideas. *Sabbath Songs* extends the idea of a living, angelic *merkavah* to the whole heavenly temple. According to Gregory, Moses gets a glimpse of the heavenly realms – of the powers which support the universe, which are slipped through our souls and raise us to virtue, which shield the incomprehensible mysteries. The only way these can be described is in material terms – as silver and gold pillars, as bearing poles and rings, as cherubim. Other writers in the Alexandrian tradition interpret individual elements of the heavenly temple in terms of heavenly powers, but none lays down a general rule for doing so in the way that Gregory does. By using Colossians 1:16 he creates a picture of an angelic body of Christ which parallels Christ’s earthly body, the church. But when working through the details he is not consistent. This is partly because he shoehorns in older traditions, such as the association between the mercy-seat and Christ’s redemptive action, or between the seven lights of the candlestick and the seven characteristics of the Spirit in Isaiah 11. His interpretations oscillate between the angelological and the christological. Particularly problematic is his use of the phrase ‘around the divine nature’ with reference to the cherubim/seraphim, as elsewhere in his works this is reserved for divine attributes. Such oscillation, the lack of a clear-cut distinction between the divine and the angelic, can also be found in *Sabbath Songs* and the Hekhalot texts. This needn’t imply that Gregory, the Qumran community or the authors of the Hekhalot literature were confused about the difference between God and angels. Alexander argues that, in the case of *Sabbath Songs*, the angelic liturgies, with their dramatic setting, “only make sense if we postulate an eternal distinction between the worshipping community and the divine object of its adoration” (2006a, 105). In Gregory’s case, the gap between Creator and creation is certainly firmly established. This then allows language to be used freely, with occasional logical inconsistencies.
4.7  The earthly tabernacle

Whenever the prophet looks to the tabernacle above, he sees the heavenly realities through these symbols. But if one should look at the tabernacle below (since in many places the Church also is called Christ by Paul) ... (Vit. Moys. 2.184)

4.7.1 Life of Moses 2.184-187 and its biblical context

From the saving passion, Gregory turns his attention to the earthly tabernacle. He has previously described it as a type of the incarnate Christ; but here he does not elaborate further on its relationship to the incarnation. Instead, relying on Paul’s portrayal of the church as the body of Christ (Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:12-13; Eph 1:22-23), he uses the earthly tabernacle to depict the church. Gregory does not mention it, but there is also precedent in Paul for both individual Christians and the church being described as God’s temple (1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19-22). Rowland writes, “The imagery of the Temple was in the theological bloodstream of early Christians and through them became part of Christian identity” (2007, 479). As we shall see below, Clement comments on the relationship between the temple, the incarnation and the church; and Origen develops elaborate allegorical interpretations of the tabernacle in terms of the church. Gregory is not therefore being particularly original in seeing the earthly tabernacle as a type of the church; but in expounding it here, in parallel with Moses’ vision of the heavenly tabernacle, he is making a statement about where Christians should view themselves in relationship to the “mysterious things” (2.173) of which he has been speaking.

Gregory does not systematically interpret all the furniture of the earthly tabernacle, only picking out a few features. He starts with ‘pillars’ and ‘lights’, assembling a medley of New Testament passages:

It would be well to regard the names “apostles, teachers, and prophets” (1 Cor 12:28) as referring to those servants of the divine mystery whom Scripture also calls pillars of the Church (Gal 2:9). For it is not only Peter and John and James who are pillars of the Church, nor was only John the Baptist a burning light (John 5:35), but all those who themselves support the Church and become lights (Phil 2:15) through their own works are called “pillars” and “lights.” You are the light of the world (Matt 5:14), says the Lord to the Apostles. And again the divine Apostle bids others to be pillars, saying Be steadfast and unmovable (1 Cor 15:58). And he made Timothy into an excellent pillar, when he made him (as he says in his own words) a pillar and ground of truth (1 Tim 3:15). (2.184)

He has presented the pillars as an important feature of the tabernacle:
There were gold pillars supported by silver bases and decorated with similar silver capitals; then, there were other pillars whose capitals and bases were of bronze but whose shafts were of silver. The core of all the pillars was wood that does not rot. But all around shone the brightness of these precious metals. (2.170; cf. 1.49)

In the MT of Exodus, the tabernacle is constructed using קרש יח – planks or possibly frames (Ex 26:15) – overlaid with gold (Ex 26:29). There are then four pillars (עמודים, Ex 26:32) overlaid with gold at the entrance to the holy of holies, and five (Ex 26:37) at the door of the tent. The hangings around the courtyard are hung on pillars with fillets (חשכים) of silver (Ex 27:10-18). The LXX translates both קרש יח and עמודים by στῦλοι, and describes the courtyard pillars as silver-plated (κατηργυρωμένοι). The details of the bases and capitals (not to mention tenons, rings, bars, hooks and fillets) become highly complicated, especially as the LXX translation is inaccurate and inconsistent. The small solid gold hooks (וים, Ex 26:32, 37) of the MT, for example, become implausible solid gold capitals (κεφαλίδες) in the LXX. Gregory, in turn, provides a simplified account of the LXX. His interest in the pillars is no doubt fuelled by their allegorical possibilities. He also refers to them in On the Song of Songs, in the context of Song of Songs 5:15: “His legs are marble pillars, founded upon golden bases” (LXX). Alluding to Proverbs 9:1, he says,

The house which Wisdom built for herself has many columns; many also were the columns adorned with various materials propping up the tent of witness, whose capitals and bases were of gold, while their middle sections were embellished with a silver sheath. The bride says that the church’s columns are of marble standing on golden bases … (GNO 6.415; my translation)

This does not correspond to anything in either the MT or the LXX of Exodus: nowhere are there any bases made of gold. Gregory has been too eager to reconcile the Song of Songs’ verse with the pillars of the tabernacle. He goes on to refer to Galatians 2:9 (GNO 6.416.13-15; 419.9-10) and 1 Timothy 3:15 (GNO 6.415.21-22; 416.18; 419.1-3, 12-13), as in Life of Moses. The ‘lights’ of Life of Moses 2.184 presumably refer to the “candlestick with a single base, divided at its top into seven branches, each supporting a lamp” (2.171). Heine contends that there is “a repeated emphasis on the leadership of the church throughout the treatise” and, specifically, that Gregory “thinks of the leaders of the church when he considers the earthly tabernacle” (1975, 24). But having mentioned prominent figures of Christian history, Gregory holds out the possibility that all Christians can become ‘pillars’ and ‘lights’, so long as they support the church and shine by their works. Similarly in On the Song of Songs, he says that the bridegroom’s

75 For the details of the LXX translation see Gooding (1959, 20-23, 40-51).
legs are “those persons who support and bear the shared body of the Church by exemplary lives and sound words. Through them the base of faith is firm, the course of virtue is completed; and the entire body is raised on high by those steeped in divine hopes” (GNO 6.417; McCambley 1987, 252, amended). There is no reference to hierarchy.

Gregory moves on to the worship of the earthly tabernacle, turning physical sacrifices into praise and prayer. We shall examine his comments in the next section (4.8), comparing them with his description of heavenly worship.

The laver/basin (λουτήρ, cf. LXX Ex 30:18, 28; 31:9; 38:26, 27) is not mentioned in connection with the heavenly tabernacle, either by Exodus or Gregory. In Exodus, the earthly tabernacle contains a single one, but Gregory seems to think that there are several (2.172), and makes them a symbol of baptism:

When hearing about the lavers, one will certainly perceive those who wash away the blemish of sins with mystical water. John was a laver, washing men in the Jordan with the baptism of repentance, as was Peter, who led three thousand at the same time to the water. Philip, too, was a laver of the servant of Candace, and all those who administer grace are lavers to those who share in the free gift. (2.185)

It is interesting that nowhere in this tabernacle interpretation does Gregory mention the Eucharist, especially as one would have thought that the table and show breads would have provided an obvious ‘type’.

Next Gregory refers to τὰς αὐλαίας, αἱ διὰ τῆς μετ’ ἀλλήλων συμβολῆς τὴν σκηνὴν ἐν κύκλῳ διαλαμβάνουσι (2.186), which Malherbe and Ferguson translate as “the interconnecting courts which surround the tabernacle” and Daniélou as “les tentures qui, jointes ensemble, font le tour du tabernacle”. The LXX designates the curtains (يرיעה) of the tabernacle αὐλαίαι (Ex 26:1). The hangings (קלעים) of the outer court (חצר; αὐλή) it calls ἱστία (Ex 27:9). Gregory seems to use παραπετάσματα (1.49, 50, 61) for the curtains of the tabernacle (reserving καταπετάσματα (1.50, 61; 2.172, 178) for the veil dividing off the holy of holies). Has he transferred αὐλαίαι to the hangings around the outer court, or is he using αὐλαίαι as a variant of αὐλέας (of or belonging to the court)? On balance, Daniélou’s translation fits the Greek and the description of the tabernacle slightly better: there is only one court around the tabernacle, surrounded by hangings.

76 Except at Ex 37:10,14, where, inexplicably, it uses αὐλαίαι.
which have been joined together. (Malherbe and Ferguson translate the phrase ἡ ἔξωθεν τῶν αὐλαίων περιβολή in 2.172 as “hangings around the outer court”.) Either way, the hangings/courts symbolize the “harmony, love and peace of believers” (2.186). Gregory quotes another verse from the psalms:

David interprets it in this way when he says: *Who has granted you peace on your frontiers.* (2.186, cf. Ps 147:14, LXX 147:3)

One can hear here the voice of the bishop concerned about the detrimental effect of contemporary theological controversies.

According to the instructions given to Moses, the tabernacle curtains were to be covered with an outer tent made of goat’s hair (Ex 26:7 cf. 25:4). A further layer was to include rams’ skins dyed red (Ex 26:14 cf. Ex 25:5). In the context of the heavenly tabernacle, Gregory has interpreted the skin dyed red and the coverings made of hair as the saving passion. In the earthly tabernacle they become “the mortification (νέκρωσις) of the sinful flesh … and the ascetic way of life (διαγωγὴ κατ’ ἐγκράτειαν)” (2.187).

Christ’s passion is to be imitated by the believer. Gregory places particular importance on this: “By these the tabernacle of the church is especially beautified”; although later in the paragraph he becomes reticent about his interpretation: “Whether or not Scripture signifies by the red dye chaste modesty, I leave for whoever wishes to decide”. He offers two interpretations of the red skins. The first includes his second mention of the Holy Spirit, again not “in a strictly theological context” (Malherbe & Ferguson 1978, 16):

> By nature these skins do not have in themselves a vital power, but they become bright red because of the red dye. This teaches that grace, which flourishes through the Spirit, is not found in men unless they first make themselves dead to sin.

(2.187)

The second is “chaste modesty (σώφρων αἰδώς)”. Gregory refers specifically to virginity:

> The woven hair, which produced a fabric rough and hard to the touch, foreshadows the self-control (ἐγκράτειαν) which is rough and consumes the habitual passions. The life of virginity (ἡ ἐν παρθενίᾳ ζωή) demonstrates in itself all such things, as it chastises (ὑπωπιάζουσα) the flesh of all those who live in this way.

(2.187)

The verb ὑπωπιάζω alludes to 1 Corinthians 9:26-7, where Paul says, “Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel (ὑπωπιάζω) my body and subdue (δουλαγωγῶ) it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified”.

The final paragraph in Gregory’s exposition of the earthly tabernacle, concerning the holy of holies, will be examined in 4.9.

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77 The first reference is in 2.181, see 4.6.1.
4.7.2 Alexandrian context

Paul depicts the church as both the body of Christ and a temple. Ephesians uses temple language (2:19-21) and body terminology (1:22-23; 4:12), “yielding a complex mix of imagery concerning organic and structural growth” (Rowland 2007, 475). 1 Peter 2:5 also uses temple language metaphorically to refer to the community of the Christian elect. John 2:21, meanwhile, describes Jesus’ body as a temple. In a fragment said to come from Clement’s *Canon of the Church* or *Against the Judaisers* (a work otherwise lost), these New Testament precedents enable the temple to become a type both of the incarnation and the church. The passage takes as its point of departure Solomon’s remark in 1 Kings 8:27 (LXX “But will God indeed dwell with men upon the earth?”). Clement comments,

In the book of Kings, Solomon, the son of David, understood that the construction of the true temple was not only a heavenly and spiritual matter, but concerned already the flesh which the son and Lord of David was destined to build, not only by his presence (παρουσίαν), which he decided to establish as an animate image (ἀγαλμα ἐμψυχον), but also by the church, raised up in the assembly of faith. He said, word for word, “Will then God truly dwell with men on earth?” He dwells on earth (κατοικεῖ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς), clothed in flesh (σάρκα περιβαλλόμενος), and the union and harmony among the righteous, making and building a holy temple, becomes his dwelling with men. For the righteous are earth (γῆ γὰρ οἱ δίκαιοι) while still clad in earth, and earth when compared to the greatness of the Lord. About these indeed the blessed Peter did not hesitate to say, “And like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” About his body, which, as a circumscribed space filled with divinity (κατὰ περιγραφὴν τόπον ἐνθεον), he himself consecrated on earth, the Lord said, “‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he spoke of the temple of his body.” (GCS 3.218-9; my translation)

The first Jerusalem temple was not only a copy of the heavenly temple, but also a prefiguration of the body of Christ – the incarnate Christ, the church, and the individual members within it. (The element in Gregory which is missing in Clement is the heavenly temple as a type of the pre-existent Christ.) As Mondésert writes,

On peut admirer d’abord, dans ces quelques lignes, l’amplitude de la vision spirituelle, qui parcourt toute la Bible, de l’Ancien au Nouveau Testament, du temple de pierre de Salomon au temple de la Jérusalem céleste, en passant par ce temple admirable que fut le Christ vivant sur terre, et qui est maintenant continué par le corps de l’Église, rassemblement des hommes encore plongés dans la vie d’ici-bas. Et d’ailleurs chacun d’eux, s’il est juste, est aussi un lieu saint, plein de la divinité. (1949, 581)

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78 For a French translation and commentary on this fragment, see Mondésert (1949).
The same combination of ideas is taken up by Origen when commenting on John 2:18-21:

The Saviour, however, by joining as one the saying about his own body with that about that temple, answers the question, “What sign do you show us, seeing that you do these things?” with “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ... Both, however, (I mean the temple and Jesus’ body) according to one interpretation, appear to me to be a type of the Church, in that the Church, being called a “temple,” is built of living stones, becoming a spiritual house “for a holy priesthood,” built “upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus being the chief corner stone.” (Comm. Jo. 10.226, 228; Heine 1989, 305)

Thanks to the macrocosm-microcosm relationship, Philo’s elaborate cosmological interpretation of the tabernacle and its furniture leads to anthropological understandings of tabernacle symbolism, although Philo does not develop these in anything like as much detail as he does his cosmology. Origen picks up on Philo’s presentation of the relationship between cosmology and anthropology:

For if, as some before us have said, this tabernacle represents the whole world, and each individual also can contain an image of the world, why can not each one also complete a form of the tabernacle in himself? (Hom. Exod. 9.4; Heine 1982, 340-1)

But he links his anthropological interpretation to the tabernacle as symbolic of the church. The virtues he sees represented there are not those of human beings in general, but of the believers who constitute the church. In Homilies on Exodus (9 and 13) and Homilies on Numbers (5) he analyses the elements of the tabernacle with as much care as Philo, but with cosmology and anthropology turned into ecclesiology. Homilies on Numbers 5 deals with Numbers 4, which enumerates the duties of the Levites when packing up the tent of meeting. Origen interprets “the tabernacle of testimony to refer to all the saints who are assessed under God’s covenant”. Its furniture represents those “more exalted in their merits and superior in grace” (Hom. Num. 5.3.2; Scheck 2009, 19): The lampstand is the apostles; the holy table those who refresh and feed souls hungry for justice; the incense altar those who pray for the entire people; the ark those to whom God has entrusted these mysteries; the mercy-seat those who intercede for the sins of the people; and the cherubim those who abound in the wealth of the knowledge of God. The biblical context of packing up and moving on allows him to talk of those represented by these symbols being carried on the shoulders of angels to the promised land (Hom. Num. 5.3.3). In Homilies on Exodus he focuses on the materials which go into making the tabernacle. They represent, he says, “those things by which the Church is adorned”: gold is faith; silver is the word of preaching; bronze is patience; incorruptible wood is either the knowledge which comes through the wood (presumably the cross) or the
incorruptibility of purity; linen is virginity (*Hom. Exod*. 9.3; Heine 1982, 340; cf. *Hom. Exod*. 13.2). Like Gregory, he associates pillars with Galatians 2:9, and so allegorises them in terms of teachers and ministers. He adds further detail: the interposed bars are the right hand of fellowship; the silver overlay is the words of the Lord, “pure words, silver proved by fire” (Ps 12:6); the bases are the prophets and their testimonies; and the capitals of the pillars are Christ. He takes notice of the peculiarities of the biblical text: In 13.4-5 he picks up on the ‘scarlet doubled’ (κόκκινον διπλοῦν) and the ‘twisted linen’ (βύσσον κεκλωσμένην) of the LXX text of Exodus 35:6. The ‘scarlet doubled’ he links with two kinds of fire: the fire that enlightens, and the fire that burns; and he finds biblical verses relating to each. The ‘twisted linen’ he sees as symbolic of weakening the flesh “by abstinence, by vigils, and by the exertion of meditations” (*Hom. Exod*. 13.5; Heine 1982, 383).

Although Gregory, like Origen, interprets the earthly tabernacle as symbolic of the church, there seem to be few correlations between their accounts, although it is difficult to make precise comparisons as we only have Origen’s homilies in Rufinus’ Latin translation. They both use Galatians 2:9 to connect the apostles with the pillars; but Gregory adds other NT verses, and widens his interpretation to include all supportive church members. Gregory’s comments on lights, sacrifices, lavers and interconnecting curtains seem to have no parallel in Origen. (Rufinus’ translation, however, does reflect the confusion between curtains and courts: the word ‘court’ (*atrium*) occurs in contexts where ‘curtain’ (*cortina*) would be expected. Heine (1982, 339-40 n.26) is unsure whether the confusion originates with Rufinus or Origen.) Origen comments that “hair is a dead, bloodless, soulless form”, and therefore that the person who offered this material towards the building of the tabernacle “shows that the disposition to sin is already dead in himself, nor does sin further live or rule in his members” (*Hom. Exod*. 13.5; Heine 1982, 383). In the context of the skins and hair coverings, Gregory also mentions becoming dead to sin. But he adds an emphasis on asceticism, talking of mortification, self-control and virginity. Origen does quote 1 Corinthians 9:27, with its reference to chastising and subduing the body, but in the context of the ‘twisted linen’ rather than the coverings of skin (*Hom. Exod*. 13.5; Heine 1982, 383). He mentions virginity in passing:

This is the sanctuary which the Lord orders to be constructed, which the Apostle also wishes to be present in virgins “that they may be holy in body and spirit,” (1 Cor 7:34) knowing without doubt that he who makes a sanctuary for the Lord by the purity of his own heart and body will himself see God. Let us, therefore, also make a sanctuary for the Lord both collectively and individually. (*Hom. Exod*. 9.3; Heine 1982, 338)
4.7.3 Theological context

Gregory’s interpretation of the tabernacle, unlike Clement’s or the Valentinians’, does not end with an entry into the heavenly holy of holies. It turns from the heavenly to the earthly tabernacle. Is this simply a reflection of the Exodus narrative, or does it serve a purpose for Gregory? The first question to ask is ‘For whom did Gregory write Life of Moses?’ Towards the beginning of the work, he declares, “Let us put forth Moses as our example for life” (1.15). To whom does the ‘our’ refer? Is Gregory writing for all Christians, or only for a select minority? It is often assumed that he presents Moses as “a model of the soul’s spiritual journey to God” (McGinn 1991, 140); but are all souls expected to imitate Moses equally?

Gregory tells us that the treatise was written in response to a letter requesting “some counsel concerning the perfect life” (1.2). In some manuscripts, the name Caesarius is found in the concluding paragraphs. Daniélou includes it in his edition (2.319), Musurillo does not. In any case, it does not get us any further, as Caesarius is “otherwise unknown” (Malherbe & Ferguson 1978, 3). Gregory tells his recipient, “Although there may be nothing useful for you in my words, perhaps this example of ready obedience will not be wholly unprofitable to you” (1.2). Daniélou concludes, “Ceci indique que le destinataire est moine” (2000, 47 n.1). The same conclusion was reached much earlier: a fourteenth century manuscript (codex Vaticanus graecus 444) adds πρὸς Καισάριον μόναχον to the title. Malherbe and Ferguson argue that “the treatise … takes its place as part of Gregory’s program to provide an ideological undergirding for the monastic movement organized by Basil” (1978, 3). Heine, however, puts forward the view that the treatise was directed not to a monk, but a priest (1975, 22). He bases his argument on Gregory’s interpretation of the blossoming of the rod of Aaron (Num 17; Vit. Moys. 2.316). Gregory calls it ‘the rod of priesthood’, and makes reference to “your office (ἀξίωμα)”. According to Heine, this rod of priesthood “seems to have special significance for the person to whom the treatise is dedicated”; and this person “appears to hold an office which can be compared in some way to that of Moses” (1975, 22-23). Malherbe and Ferguson, however, translate ἀξίωμα not by ‘office’ but by ‘worth’, which weakens the force of Heine’s argument. As already mentioned, Heine also says that there is “a repeated emphasis on the leadership of the church throughout the treatise” (1975, 23). He includes among the passages with this emphasis the earthly tabernacle, as a representation of the church, and the priestly vestments, symbolically teaching about
“priestly virtue” (1.55). This virtue is two-fold, involving faith and conduct (2.198), which Heine sees as appropriate for a work addressed to a priest:

Virtue, for a man who led and taught in the church, had to be carefully regulated by the rule of orthodoxy. Both his belief and his life had to be correct by this standard. (1975, 25)

In some of Gregory’s statements about Moses’ virtuous example, there seems to be no reason why he should not be imitated by all Christians:

The lives of honoured men (are) set forth as a pattern of virtue (ἀρετῆς ὑπόδειγμα) for those who come after them. Those who emulate their lives, however, cannot experience the identical literal events. … (Therefore) 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. (2.48-49)

In other passages, however, Moses is clearly a leader, and not to be imitated by all:

The person who has crossed the sea … believes in God … and is obedient to his servant Moses. We see this happening even now with those who truly cross the water, who dedicate themselves to God and are obedient and submissive, as the Apostle says, to those who serve the Divine in the priesthood. (2.130)

The multitude was not capable of hearing the voice from above but relied on Moses to learn by himself the secrets and to teach the people whatever doctrine he might learn through instruction from above. This is also true of the arrangement in the Church: Not all thrust themselves toward the apprehension of the mysteries, but, choosing from among themselves someone who is able to hear things divine, they give ear gratefully to him, considering trustworthy whatever they might hear from someone initiated into the divine mysteries. (2.160)

*Life of Moses* is not the only work in which Gregory cites Moses as an example. In *Life of Gregory the Wonderworker* and *Eulogy for the Great Basil, his Brother* he compares the two bishops to Moses. Sterk outlines the way in which in both works Gregory uses “the three stages of Moses’ life as a paradigm for the episcopate” (1998, 228):

Ideally the episcopal candidate should be educated in profane learning, would abandon academic and all other ambitions for the contemplative life, and should finally sacrifice even the bliss of monastic solitude in order actively to serve the people of God. (1998, 250)

*Life of Moses* is not structured in the same way, but it is interesting to note that Gregory had been reflecting on the figure of Moses for some time (assuming the traditional dating). His previous use of Moses in connection with two outstanding Cappadocian bishops may well have influenced *Life of Moses*. Sterk argues that both Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus “managed to harmonize monastic ideals and practices with active service to the church” (1998, 228). The vision of the tabernacle played a crucial role in their self understanding:
(Moses’) encounter with God on Mount Sinai and consequent “instruction from above” or “initiation into the mysteries” was indispensable preparation for the task of instructing the multitudes. Indeed the vision of God epitomized by the Sinai theophany was the ultimate goal of monastic withdrawal and the mark of the true theologian. To teach or lead the Christian people without such a revelation was for both Gregorys the height of presumption. (1998, 250)

This suggests that Gregory did not see Moses as a model to be imitated by all, or even by all priests. *Life of Moses* implies that, in being granted a vision of the heavenly tabernacle, Moses joined the elite company of David, Paul and John. Everyone else should aspire to becoming a pillar or light in the earthly tabernacle. Whether the historical addressee was a monk or a priest, the message of the treatise is not about aspiring to a vision of heavenly mysteries, but belonging to the worshipping community on earth.

In that worshipping community, asceticism was clearly to take pride of place. Heine may be right that Gregory was targeting Christians, including possibly Eunomius, who did not put enough emphasis on right living. But could Gregory also have been guarding against those whose asceticism was distancing them from the Christian community? That he was quite capable of attacking two opposite extremes at once can be illustrated from *On Virginity*:

> Who could enumerate all such deviations into which one is carried because of not wishing to associate himself with those esteemed in the sight of God? Of these, we know also those who starve themselves to death on the grounds that such a sacrifice is pleasing to God, and again, others, completely opposite to these, who practice celibacy in name, but who do not refrain from social life, not only enjoying the pleasures of the stomach, but living openly with women ... (GNO 8,1.337-338; Callahan 1967, 71)

The idea that Gregory was concerned to prevent individualistic asceticism ties in with Malherbe and Ferguson’s argument that he provided an ideological undergirding for Basil’s monastic movement. Basil, a disciple of Eustathius of Sebaste,79 was “in contact with the incipient ‘wild-man’ element of early monasticism” (Plested 2004, 47); but encouraged its integration into ecclesial structures. According to Plested, “he set a pattern whereby the charismatic and eschatological vision of monasticism might be integrated within an ecclesiastical framework” (2004, 48). And “Gregory of Nyssa’s irenic and sympathetic approach to aberrant forms of monasticism perfectly accords with that of Basil” (2004, 57). Gribomont summaries Basil and Gregory’s attitude to the Eustathian monks and their successors as follows:

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79 Basil broke with Eustathius in 371-2, over the divinity of the Holy Spirit.
Le meilleur moyen de tirer parti de ces forces impétueuses était de les discipliner de l’intérieur, de les purifier en leur faisant méditer le Nouveau Testament, de les mettre au service de l’Eglise et de les unir à la hiérarchie, non sans plaider leur cause devant le public cultivé en dissertant avec art sur leurs antécédents philosophiques. (1962, 321)

This is illustrated by Gregory’s use of the Great Letter of (Pseudo-)Macarius as the model for his treatise On the Christian Mode of Life (De Instituto Christiano). The Great Letter itself has been seen as exercising a moderating influence on radical ascetic tendencies, and “Gregory’s respect for his model was such as to allow him to incorporate the positive aspects of ascetic enthusiasm within his own teaching” (Plested 2004, 57). There are some interesting parallels between On the Christian Mode of Life and the short commentary on the earthly tabernacle in Life of Moses. The themes of baptism, harmony amongst believers, the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the hardships of the virtuous life, which Gregory sees in the earthly tabernacle, also appear in On the Christian Mode of Life. This background may explain why he allegorises the lavers as baptisers, but does not take the opportunity to make the showbread, for example, a symbol of the Eucharist. In On the Christian Mode of Life Gregory emphasises that “holy Baptism is important, important for the things perceptible to the mind of those who receive it with fear; for the rich and ungrudging Spirit is always flowing into those accepting grace, filled with which the holy apostle reaped a full harvest for the churches of Christ” (GNO 8,1.44; Callahan 1967, 129). The Eucharist does not feature in the same way.

Gregory’s commentary on the earthly tabernacle illustrates the high value he placed on ascetic observance. But it is significant that he places this observance within the church. He is not encouraging individualistic attempts to imitate Moses. The benefits of the vision that Moses received – an understanding of the heavenly and earthly Christ – are available to all through the earthly body of Christ, the church.

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80 These tendencies are usually labelled ‘Messalian’, and identified with the Messalian heretics who were condemned by a series of synods and councils, starting with synods held during the 380s or 390s at Antioch in Syria and Side in Pamphylia. But there are problems with this identification. “None of our immediate sources are able to provide a convincing picture of the nature of Messalianism. We know that Messalianism was; we do not know what it was. We are led to the conclusion that ‘Messalianism’ was little more than a sobriquet for a radical ascetic tendency stemming from the Syrian East, and ... little welcomed or understood by the Greek bishops who confronted it” (Plested 2004, 21). For more details see Stewart (1991) and Plested (2004).
4.7.4 Heavenly ascent context

Exodus presents the earthly tabernacle as a copy of a heavenly model. Thus the tabernacle and temple were provided with heavenly endorsement. But by Second Temple times, not everyone was convinced that the endorsement still stood. Heavenly ascent texts witness to unease about whether the earthly temple still was a faithful copy of the heavenly original. Himmelfarb writes,

The Book of the Watchers’ interest in a heavenly Temple reflects a certain discontent with the earthly Temple and its personnel. The author uses the story of the fall of the watchers to criticize the corrupt priests of the Jerusalem Temple. As angels fail to perform their duties in heaven, these priests fail to fulfill their responsibilities in the earthly Temple, and for some of the same reasons, like inappropriate marriages. (1991, 67-8)

Schäfer detects not mild condemnation, but a devastating critique, since Enoch’s vision could imply that God in fact can no longer be found in the Temple on earth: the holy of Holies in the earthly Temple is indeed empty; the missing Ark signals that God is gone, that he has withdrawn himself to his Temple in heaven. (2009, 66)

He also draws attention to the Temple-critical motif in Testament of Levi:

Levi is invested with the insignia of the priesthood, yet unfortunately, his successors will not live up to the task. They will corrupt the priesthood until God appoints a new eschatological priest whose priesthood will endure forever. (2009, 28)

Once the Jerusalem temple had been destroyed, there no longer was an earthly copy of God’s heavenly dwelling. Elior suggests that the Hekhalot texts involve “a transferal and elevation of the priestly and Levitical traditions of Temple worship to the supernal regions” (1997, 222). As we shall see in the next section (4.8.4), Schäfer argues that they validate synagogue worship. But the synagogue is never described as a temple. Rabbinic Judaism does not use temple language to describe congregational gatherings. The church, on the other hand, starting with Paul, appropriates temple imagery to describe its community life. The only Jewish parallel is the literature from Qumran. 81

4Q174 (4QFlorilegium) has already been mentioned in the section on the tabernacle not made with hands (4.3.1). It refers not only to the temple of Israel, now defiled, and to the eschatological temple to be built by God, but also to a ‘temple of man’:

81 Gärtner writes, “The resemblance between Qumran and the New Testament on (the) point of temple symbolism is sufficiently detailed to suggest that there must have existed some form of common tradition” (1965, 100-101). Hogeterp questions many of Gärtner’s presuppositions, and denies any “direct relation between early Christian and Qumranite traditions about the temple” (2005, 91), but does argue that “Paul relied on Palestinian Jewish temple-theological traditions” (2005, 108). The question of the relationship, if any, between Qumran traditions and Christianity need not be settled for this heuristic comparison.
And he commanded to build for himself a temple of man (מקדש אדם), to offer him in it, before him, the works of thanksgiving (מעשי תודה). (4Q174 1 i 21, 2 6-7; Martínez & Tignélaar 1997-1998, 1.353)

According to Brooke,

This highly descriptive phrase means literally “sanctuary of Adam” or “sanctuary of man” which can also be taken collectively as “sanctuary of men”. The purpose of the sanctuary is to make smoking sacrifices which are appositionally described as “deeds of thanksgiving,” thank-offerings. (1999, 288)

He argues that the phrase is deliberately polyvalent:

The two principal meanings would seem to be that of “sanctuary of man/men,” namely a reference to the community to whom the commentary is addressed as if they are formed to be a sanctuary proleptically, and “sanctuary of Adam,” that is a reference to how both the proleptic last days community-sanctuary and the divinely constructed eschatological sanctuary would be places where the intention of God in creating Eden would be restored. (1999, 288-9)

Dimant comments further on the Qumran community’s self-perception, arguing that “the community, or, in fact, its core of full members, functioned analogically to a community of priestly angels, officiating in the innermost sanctuary of the heavenly temple” (1996, 98). In support of this, she draws up a comparison between the angelic activities depicted in Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice and the main activities of the Qumran community as described in such documents as 1QS (Community Rule), 1QH (Thanksgiving Hymns) and CD (Damascus Document), and concludes that “a striking resemblance” is revealed (1996, 100). “In spite of the keenly felt abyss separating men from angels, the community aimed at creating on earth a replica of the heavenly world. Thus, the notorious communion of the Qumranites with the angels, referred to by several scrolls, should be understood as a communion by analogy rather than an actual one” (1996, 101). Fletcher-Louis disagrees with the idea of a “keenly felt abyss separating men from angels”, and a communion by analogy. He argues that Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice do not describe angelic worship in heaven, but the worship of the community, with the community members taking on “a heavenly, angelic and divine identity” (1998, 369):

The cosmology which can describe the cultic space in terms of the heavenly world is one which believes that the true temple is a microcosm of the universe. And the place where all this liturgy and a communion between angels and men takes place will then be the human community’s own, concrete, earthly cultic space. (2002, 274)

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82 Dimant (1986, 169) prefers the reading מעשי תורה – works of Torah.

83 Wise disagrees with Brooke (and Dimant), arguing that מקדש אדם is another name for the temple of the Lord: an actual physical temple, “which Israel is to build for the first stage of the eschaton, the End of Days” (1991, 131).
He questions, in other words, the presence at Qumran of what he sees as a dualistic “Temple-above and Temple-below idea” (2002, 273). Alexander thinks that Fletcher-Louis has taken realised eschatology too far:

The extent to which he envisages the community as a whole, or at least its priesthood, as having already transcended its humanity, and achieved immortality, amounts almost to a totally realized eschatology, which does not sit easily either with common sense (had the community completely lost touch with reality?), or with its continued experience of the trials and tribulations of the world, the burdens of the flesh and the struggle with sin (which are vividly described all over their literature), or with its sharp longing for an eschatological deliverance. (2006b, 47)

He agrees with Dimant and Brooke that “the living community at Qumran ... constituted God’s temple on earth” and that the aim of their worship was to “commune with the angels in the heavenly sanctuary” (2006b, 100). But although there may be disagreement over the extent to which the community members identified themselves with angels, and whether there was one temple or two, there is no doubt about the pervasive use of temple imagery in the community’s self-understanding.

There are many similarities between Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice and the later Hekhalot texts, particularly in their descriptions of the heavenly world. But there is no parallel to the Qumran community’s self-designation as a temple. Like Christianity, rabbinic Judaism had to adapt to the loss of the temple. Both the synagogue and the home took on temple characteristics; but there was no wholesale appropriation of priestly temple theology to designate the people of God. B. Hagigah witnesses to rabbinic unease about merkavah speculation. Using dramatic examples, it conveys the message that exposition of the merkavah is for the select few, everyone else is to steer clear. The alternative to attempts to penetrate the heavenly mysteries is spelt out by the wider rabbinic corpus. The halakhah focuses on the details of daily living. That is where the mitsvot are to be carried out – not in heaven. No link is made between daily living and the tradition of heavenly ascent. Gregory too is concerned that not everyone should attempt to follow Moses up the mountain and glimpse the ‘tabernacle not made with hands’. Most people are to reap the benefit of Moses’ vision by participating in the church, and clothing themselves with faith and virtue. But Gregory is able to draw on pre-existing Christian imagery of the church as body and temple. There is no need to speculate about the divine essence, because the worshipping community is the body of Christ. The mystery of the incarnation is embodied in the earthly tabernacle, the church. In their different ways, both Gregory and the rabbis argue that there is no escape from the

84 See Alexander (2006b, 125-127).
difficult business of human living, no fast lane to heaven. Only Gregory, however, is able to tie his argument to an earthly copy of the heavenly temple.

4.7.5 Conclusions

One way in which Gregory undermines the dangerous potential of heavenly ascent traditions is by his use of the earthly tabernacle. Moses was granted a vision of the heavenly tabernacle so that the Israelites could build a copy of it. It is to this earthly tabernacle that the people in general, as opposed to a few privileged figures, are to relate. Gregory first allegorises the earthly tabernacle as the incarnation, and then as the church. His prescription for Christian life is not a solitary ascent to the divine world, but participation in the orthodox Christian community on earth. He stresses the value of asceticism to this community. His identification of the earthly tabernacle as the church taps into longstanding Christian traditions, going back to Paul, both of the church as the body of Christ, and of the church community as a temple. There is a Jewish parallel in the Qumran literature. There, as in Gregory, we find a heavenly temple composed of angels, and an earthly one made up of human beings. The relationship between them, however, is depicted differently. At Qumran angels and humans mingle, particularly in liturgy, as we shall see in the next section. The community was critical of the temple cult in Jerusalem, and therefore participated in the heavenly cult instead. Gregory keeps the heavenly and earthly tabernacles separate. The heavenly model validates the earthly church, so that the need for ascent is obviated.
4.8 Heavenly and earthly worship

When I hear of the altar of offering (θυσιαστήριον) and the altar of incense (θυμιατήριον), I understand the adoration of the heavenly beings which is perpetually offered in this tabernacle. For (the Apostle) says that not only the tongues of those on earth and in the underworld but also of those in the heavens render praise to the beginning of things. This is the sacrifice pleasing to God, the fruit of lips (τὸ κάρπωμα τῶν χειλέων), as the Apostle says, the fragrance of prayer (τῶν προσευχῶν ἡ εὐωδία). (Vit. Moys. 2.182; Malherbe & Ferguson amended)

In this tabernacle both the sacrifice of praise and the incense of prayer are seen offered continually at morning and evening. The great David allows us to perceive these things when he directs the incense of his prayer in an odor of sweetness (ὀσμὴν εὐδίας) to God, performing his sacrifice through the lifting up of (ἐκτάσεως) his hands. (Vit. Moys. 2.185)

4.8.1 Life of Moses 2.182, 185 and their biblical context

In Gregory’s interpretation of the heavenly tabernacle furniture, the two altars suggest to him the adoration of the heavenly beings. He comments on this adoration (προσκύνησις) with a medley of New Testament verses. The first allusion is to Philippians 2:10-11 (“at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess …”), which attests to the existence of heavenly worship. The praise is said to be directed to “the beginning of things (τῇ τῶν πάντων ἀρχῇ)”. Is this God, the unbegotten first cause of creation; or Christ, as in Colossians 1:18, itself probably drawing on the characterisation of wisdom as ‘the beginning’ in Proverbs 8:22? Given the prominence of Colossians 1:15-20 in Gregory’s tabernacle interpretation, Gregory is probably thinking of Christ. In his Trinitarian theology, however, he insists that “the persons of the divinity are separated from each other by neither time nor space” (Graec.; GNO 3,1.25.8-10; Duvick 2008), so that adoration is always directed to all three (Maced.; GNO 3,1.110-111). Philippians uses the physical language of knees bowing, and Gregory too, by referring to προσκύνησις, creates a picture of angelic movement. Strictly speaking, this word refers to making obeisance, the verb προσκυνέω often being preceded by πίπτω, as in Rev 7:11. In Against the Macedonians, Gregory comments,

The prostration (ἐπίκλισιν) of subjects to the floor, which they perform when they welcome the more powerful, this human custom calls ‘adoration’ (προσκύνησιν). (GNO 3,1.111.2-5; Duvick 2008)

In philosophical moments, Gregory argues that angels have no bodies: “the human nature is mixed of both soul and body, but the angelic nature has been allotted the life that is
incorporeal” (Eust.; GNO 3,1.12.21-3; Duvick 2008). When writing more poetically, he talks of the angelic choral dance (ἡ ἄγγελικὴ χορεία) (Inscr. 2.6; GNO 5.86-7; Heine 1995, 138-9). Here his language recalls the scene in Revelation in which angels and elders fall on their faces and worship before the throne.

After Philippians comes a reference to Hebrews 13:15 (“through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips (καρπὸν χειλέων) that acknowledge his name”). Hebrews has taken the phrase “the fruit of lips” from the LXX version of Hosea 14:3. In both Hebrews and Hosea the phrase refers to human praises. The final significant phrase, “the fragrance of prayer”, recalls three New Testament verses:

For we are the aroma (εὐωδία) of Christ to God … (2 Cor 2:15)

And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (προσφορὰν καὶ θυσίαν τῷ θεῷ εἰς ὁσμὴν εὐωδίας). (Eph 5:2)

I am filled, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering (ὁσμὴν εὐωδίας), a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. (Phil 4:18)

Here too ‘fragrance’ refers to human activities. The verses from Ephesians and Philippians contain the phrase ὁσμὴ εὐωδίας (literally ‘the smell of sweetness’), the LXX translation of ריח ניחוח (cf. Ex 29:18, 25, 41). A phrase that initially referred to the smell of animal sacrifices came to denote a variety of activities pleasing to God. Gregory is drawing on a long tradition, not confined to Christian circles, of re-interpreting the sacrifices of the tabernacle/temple as verbal offerings of prayer. And then he is arguing that such verbal offerings are made not only by humans, but also by angels. In his description of angelic praise, he can but use physical, pictorial language. Since this is the heavenly tabernacle, there are altars and sacrifices. Even though the sacrifices are of prayer and praise, they are described in terms of doing obeisance, tongues, lips and fragrance. There is, however, no specification of the content of the praise. No words are put into the angels’ mouths.

In 2.184-188 Gregory turns to the earthly tabernacle. As with the heavenly tabernacle, physical sacrifices are reinterpreted spiritually: The two altars become the ‘sacrifice of praise’ (θυσία τῆς αἰνέσεως) and the ‘incense of prayer’ (θυμίαμα τῆς προσευχῆς). The first phrase occurs in Hebrews 13:15. It comes from the LXX, where it translates בזע התודה (cf. Lev 7:12 / LXX 7:2; Ps 107:22 / LXX 106:22; Ps 116:17 / LXX 115:17). In the Hebrew Bible this refers to a particular kind of sacrifice, which may or
may not be a subset of peace offerings (compare Lev 7:11-12 with Lev 22:21, 29). Hebrews reinterprets it, using the LXX version of Hosea 14:3, as “the fruit of lips”. The second phrase, the conjunction of incense and prayer, Gregory traces to Psalm 141:2:

Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice. (LXX 140:2)

There is also possibly an allusion to Revelation 5:8 in which “golden bowls full of incense” are “the prayers of the saints”. In 2.181 he talked of the fragrance of prayer, here he uses the whole LXX phrase ὀσμὴ εὐωδίας. Sacrifice and incense have become praise and prayer, which are offered in both the heavenly and the earthly tabernacles: in the angelic world and in the church. The Psalm refers to the lifting up (ἐπαρσις) of hands. A similar phrase occurs in 1 Timothy 2:8: “I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting (ἐπαίροντας) holy hands …”. Gregory, however, does not refer to lifting up, but, instead, to stretching out: ἐκτάσεως. Why make the change? The verb ἐπεκτείνω (taken from Phil 3:13) is highly significant in Life of Moses:

Ce texte de Phil. 3, 13, est le leit-motiv de tout le traité. Il exprime la thèse essentielle de Grégoire, que la perfection est un continuel progrès. (Daniélou 2000, 49 n.1)

Here we have not ἐπεκτείνω but ἐκτείνω. Elsewhere in Life of Moses ἐκτάσεως refers to Moses stretching out his hands, either to destroy the plague of frogs (2.78, 84) or to enable victory over the Amalekites (2.150, 153, 229), as a type of the cross. Is Gregory perhaps referring to a liturgical practice of stretching out arms in the form of a cross? The reference to praise and prayer being offered “continually at morning and evening” would certainly seem to be an allusion to the church’s liturgical observance of morning and evening prayer. The expression ‘day and night’, used to refer to continual worship, occurs in the New Testament (Luke 2:37; Rev 4:8); but Gregory’s text seems to be referring to particular points in the day.

4.8.2 Alexandrian context

Liturgy, whether earthly or heavenly, does not feature prominently in Alexandrian tabernacle interpretations. Philo does once describe angels as priests:

The highest, and in the truest sense the holy, temple of God is ... the whole universe, having for its sanctuary the most sacred part of all existence, even heaven, for its votive ornaments the stars, for its priests the angels who are servitors to His powers, unbodied souls ... with the irrational eliminated ... pure intelligences ... (Spec. 1.66)

He does not, however, elaborate on this identification. In his cosmological and anthropological allegorisations of the tabernacle furniture there is no mention of priests
or worship. Clement interprets the ark as “the repose which dwells with the adoring spirits” (Strom. 5.36.3; Wilson 1869, 242) and the voice of the cherubim as “delightsome glory in ceaseless contemplation” (Strom. 5.36.4; Wilson 1869, 242-3). Thus the delights of the “ineffable inheritance” available to the “spiritual and perfect man” include participation in angelic worship, but Clement’s interests lie elsewhere. Origen brings prayer into his tabernacle interpretations, but only in the context of the earthly tabernacle, not the heavenly one. His interpretation of the incense altar has similarities to Gregory’s:

Others are the ‘altar of incense,’ whosoever “by means of prayers and fasting day and night does not leave the temple” of God, who pray not only for themselves, but also for the entire people. (Hom. Num. 5.3.2; Scheck 2009, 19)

Origen, however, alludes to Anna in the temple (Luke 2:37); whereas Gregory relies on Psalm 141:2. Origen also interprets the mercy-seat in terms of the prayers of the church:

And still more are those ones to be named the ‘propitiatory,’ who with all confidence propitiate God to men by means of the sacrifices of prayers and the victims of supplications, and those who intercede for the transgressions of the people. (Hom. Num. 5.3.2; Scheck 2009, 19)

Although Origen’s interpretation of the earthly tabernacle could possibly have provided a starting point for Gregory, the two accounts differ in detail. And Origen does not present an earthly / heavenly parallelism.

4.8.3 Theological context

In Life of Moses, the heavenly and earthly tabernacles offer their praises in parallel. In On the Inscriptions of the Psalms, Gregory explains that “there was a time when the dance (ἡ χοροστασία) of the rational nature was one, and looked to the one leader of the chorus (τὸν τοῦ χοροῦ κορυφαίον)”. But sin “put an end to that divine concord of the chorus, when it poured the slipperiness of deceit at the feet of the first humans who used to sing in chorus (συγχορευόντων) with the angelic powers and caused the fall, wherefore man was separated from connection with the angels” (Inscr. 2.6; GNO 5.86; Heine 1995, 138). At the end of time, however, there will be a reunion of humanity with the angels, when “through one another and with one another they will sing a hymn of thanksgiving to God for his love for humanity which will be heard throughout the universe” (Inscr. 1.9; GNO 5.66; Heine 1995, 121). One of Gregory’s images for this reunion involves the feast of Tabernacles. In On the Soul and Resurrection, and in his sermon On the Nativity of Christ, Gregory designates the celebration at the end of time as a σκηνοπηγία. The LXX translates both סכתה and מֵּשֶׁכֶת by σκηνή, thus introducing a linguistic connection between the tabernacle as precursor of the temple and the feast of tabernacles (cf. Lev
23:34, 42-3; John 7:2) which is not there in the Hebrew. Gregory says that in LXX Ps 117:27 ("The Lord is God, and he showed us light (ἐπέφανεν ἡμῖν). Arrange a feast with the thick ones (πυκάζουσιν), up to the horns of the altar.") the word πυκάζουσιν signifies "the feast of the Tabernacles (τήν τῶν Σκηνοπηγίων ἐορτήν) which was legislated of old by the tradition of Moses" (An. et res.; PG 46.132; Roth 1993, 104) as a foretelling of what was to come. It signifies both the incarnation:

In this feast, the human tabernacle was built up (σκηνοπηγεῖται τὸ ἀνθρώπινον σκήνωμα) by Him who put on human nature because of us. Our tabernacles (σκηνώματα), which were struck down by death, are raised up again by Him Who built our dwelling from the beginning. ... It is He, Our Lord, who has appeared (ἐπέφανεν) to make the solemn feast day in thick branches of foliage up to the horns of the altar. (Diem nat.; GNO 10,2.236; Daniélou 1956a, 345)

and the end of time:

The words of life have sounded in the ears that were shut, so that one feast of harmony is made by the reunion in one cluster in the feast of Tabernacles (διὰ τοῦ πυκασμοῦ τῆς σκηνοπηγίας), of the creation below with the sublime powers around the heavenly altar. Indeed, the horns of the altar are the sublime and eminent powers of spiritual nature, the Principalities, the Powers, the Thrones and the Dominations to which human nature is reunited by the σκηνοπηγία in a common feast. (Diem nat.; GNO 10,2.237-8; Daniélou 1956a, 346)

In Life of Moses, Gregory uses the word σκηνοπηγία once:

Then the pillars … and all the other things which are contained in the description of the tabernacle’s construction (ἡ τῆς σκηνοπηγίας ὑπογραγὴ) – all of these things … are the heavenly powers … (2.179)

Daniélou comments, “Pour Grégoire ce tabernacle céleste contient la totalité de la création spirituelle, puisque les hommes en feront partie à l’apocatastase” (2000, 225 n.2). The heavenly tabernacle, therefore, is maybe a vision of what the church will become at the end of time, when humanity rejoins its older kin, the angels. In the meanwhile, the task is to build an exact replica on earth.

4.8.4 Heavenly ascent context

Through his allegorisation of the heavenly altars, Gregory depicts the heavenly powers as priests. This is nothing new. The picture of ministering angels standing around the throne of God goes back to 1 Enoch 14 and Daniel 7. Himmelfarb (1993a, 20) and Nickelsburg (2001, 265) argue that the verb ἠγγίζω, ‘draw near’, used in 1 Enoch 14:23 of certain holy ones of the angelic corps, indicates priestly service. In Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, the heavenly beings are designated priests of the inner sanctum (ח IRA}
Another indication of the link between angels and priests is the experience of the human characters who ascend to heaven. Himmelfarb (1993a, 25) argues that in *I Enoch* 14 Enoch acts as a priest: he ascends to the heavenly temple in order to intercede for the sins of the watchers, gains access to the sanctuary, and looks into the holy of holies, where God speaks to him with his own mouth. Levi ascends to heaven in order to be consecrated as a priest. In the *Aramaic Levi Document* this is deduced from the reference to anointing (4:11; Greenfield et al. 2004, 69), although the word רבת could also be translated as ‘greatness’. In *Testament of Levi* there is no ambiguity: God says, “Levi, to you I have given the blessing of the priesthood” (5:2); and in chapter 8 Levi undergoes a robing and anointing ceremony. The transformation of Enoch into “one of the glorious ones” in *2 Enoch* 22:8–10 would also seem to be a priestly investiture, although Enoch is never explicitly called a priest, as his descendants are (*2 Enoch* 69:15, 70:26, 71:19).

If angels are heavenly priests, one would presume that they offer heavenly sacrifices, and/or burn heavenly incense. However, as Newsom remarks (1985, 372), “Explicit references to a heavenly sacrificial cult are less common than one might think”. In *Testament of Levi*, “the angels of the presence of the Lord … minister and make propitiation (ξιλασχόμενοι) to the Lord for all the sins of ignorance of the righteous, and they offer to the Lord a pleasant odour (εὐωδίας), a reasonable and bloodless offering (λογικὴν καὶ ἀναίμακτον προσφοράν)” (3:5–6, Hollander & de Jonge 1985, 136). Here, as in Gregory, we have the Greek translation of ריח ניחוח. Himmelfarb comments,

I am inclined to see the “sweet savor” of the Testament of Levi as a cultic term intended to suggest that heavenly sacrifices are at once like and unlike earthly. The sweet savor is the most ethereal product of the sacrifices performed on earth; in heaven it becomes the sacrifice itself. (1993a, 35)

The wording of *Testament of Levi* 3:6 is reminiscent of Romans 12:1, suggesting that the phrase “reasonable and bloodless offering” may have come from a Christian redactor. Alexander cautions that this is not necessarily so: there were Jewish attempts to spiritualize the Jerusalem cult, set against the background of “a wider philosophical unease about animal sacrifice” (2006a, 81 n.2). *Logikos* might better be translated as ‘made up of words (logoi)’: “The adjective is simply calling attention to the fact that the offerings in heaven are ‘offerings of the lips’” (Alexander 2006a, 81). Schäfer goes
further than Himmelfarb and Alexander, suggesting the “the angels perform a sacrifice that is radically different from the sacrifice in the earthly Temple”: “it is bloodless and therefore gives off a sweet odor; its odor is truly sweet because it is bloodless” (2009, 69). In Revelation, the four living creatures and twenty four elders hold “golden bowls full of incense” (5:8), while another angel stands at the altar with a golden censor (8:3-5). In 5:8 the incense is said to be the prayers of the saints. In 8:3-4, depending on how the dative ταῖς προσευχαῖς is understood, “either the incense is mingled with the prayers of the saints or the incense is the prayers” (Mounce 1977, 182). Once again we have an association between scent and words. There is some ambiguity about whether there is one altar or two in the heavenly world of Revelation. An altar is mentioned seven times (6:9; 8:3 [x2], 5; 9:13; 14:18; 16:7). The golden altar of 8:3b is clearly the heavenly equivalent of the incense altar, which also suits most of the other references. 6:9, however, describes the souls of the martyrs as being under the altar, suggesting that the martyrs’ “untimely deaths on earth are from God’s perspective a sacrifice on the altar of heaven” (Mounce 1977, 157), which fits the altar of burnt offering. Charles insisted that Revelation conforms to the general pattern of Jewish Apocalyptic, in which there is only one altar on heaven on which “only bloodless sacrifices and incense could be offered” (1920, 1.228). This altar “has the characteristics of the earthly altar of incense, and in part those of the earthly altar of burnt-offering” (1920, 1.229). The souls of the martyrs are a living sacrifice, even if their bodies have been slain on earth. Song 13 of Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, of which there are only fragments, hints at an angelic cult:

… for the sacrifices of the Holy Ones (לזרים קדושים) … the odor of their offerings (ריח מנחותם) … and the odor of their drink offerings (ריח נספוים) …

(Song 13:5-6; 11Q17 21-22 4-5; Charlesworth & Newsom 1999, 187)

Fletcher-Louis, who denies that the text refers to a heavenly temple, sees this sacrificial language as referring to the cultic activity of the human worshippers, whether used metaphorically of praise and prayer, or providing evidence that animal sacrifices were conducted at Qumran (2002, 361). Schäfer, however, argues that these sacrifices “only make sense as substitutes for the sacrifices in the polluted earthly Temple” (2009, 141-2):85

Whereas the members of the community can participate, to some degree, in the angelic praise by reciting the songs in their worship, they can no longer offer the expiatory sacrifice. The sacrifice on earth has become corrupt, and it is only the angels in heaven who are still able to perform this ritual so crucial to the existence

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85 The question of whether the Qumran community still offered sacrifices at the Jerusalem temple is disputed. See Baumgarten (1977, 39-74), Dimant (1986, 186-7; 1996, 96-7) and Goodman (2010).
and well-being of the earthly community (until it becomes fully united with the angels). (2009, 145-6)

Song 1 does indeed mention propitiation:

… By these all the eternally Holy Ones sanctify themselves. And he purifies the pure ones of […] for all who pervert the way. And they propitiate (ויכפרו) his goodwill for all who repent of transgression.

(Song 1:15-16; 4Q400 1 i 15-16; Charlesworth & Newsom 1999, 139)

Finally, in b. Ḥagigah 12b Michael brings offerings (מקריב קרבן) to the altar of the heavenly Jerusalem, situated in Zebul, the fourth heaven. Of these texts, therefore, only Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice explicitly mentions sacrifices in heaven. Testament of Levi refers to ‘sweet savour’, but emphasises that heavenly offerings are ‘bloodless’.

Revelation talks of incense, the most evanescent of material offerings. B. Ḥagigah mentions heavenly offerings, but does not specify what they are, although commentators assume that Michael is offering human petitions. The only text, Jewish or Christian, which refers to sacrificial blood in heaven is Hebrews 9:12: “(Christ) entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption”. In all these texts, the reason that there is incense, or other offerings, in heaven is not for the sake of the angels, but because of human sin and need.

Since blood is not seen as appropriate to heaven, the worship of heavenly beings is praise. Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice gives long exhortations to heavenly praise. Praise was a component of temple worship in the form of Levitical singing, and Elior argues that it was this, rather than sacrificial rites or priestly laws, which the authors of the Hekhalot literature wanted to preserve:

They considered it necessary to preserve all the vocally and orally expressed ceremonial and numinous elements that had been denied written documentation because of their esoteric nature: the musical and vocal tradition of the Temple, on the one hand, and the tradition of Names and benedictions accompanying the Temple rites, on the other. (1997, 231)

Some texts put the words from Isaiah 6:3, the Qedushah/Sanctus, into angelic mouths, sometimes with the addition of Ezekiel 3:12. One of the earliest texts to do so is Revelation 4:8, with a slightly altered version:

And the four living creatures … day and night never cease to sing, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.

2 Enoch specifies the song of the cherubim and seraphim only in the longer recension (21:1). 3 Enoch gives a dramatic description of the recitation of the heavenly Qedushah:
When the ministering angels utter the “Holy,” all the pillars of the heavens and their bases shake, and the gates of the palaces of the heaven of ‘Arabot quiver; the foundations of the earth and of Šeḥaqim shudder; the chambers of Ma’on and the chambers of Makon and all the orders of Raqia’, the constellations and the stars, are alarmed; the orb of the sun and the orb of the moon hurry from their paths in flight … (38:1; §56; Alexander 1983, 290)

3 Enoch is unusual amongst Hekhalot texts in that it focuses exclusively on the Qedushah, and does not contain elaborate merkavah hymns. The tradition of including other hymns alongside the Qedushah starts with Revelation:

The twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him … singing,

“Worthy art thou, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honour and power,
for thou didst create all things,
and by thy will they existed and were created.” (4:11)

By the time of the Hekhalot texts, these hymns include long lists of divine names:

And I shall sanctify Your great, mighty, and awesome name:
Holy, Holy, Holy is YHWH of Hosts, Great, mighty, and awesome,
beautiful, magnificent, wondrous, and honored:
HDYRYRWM steadfast, great, pure, explicit,
Your name is carved in flames of fire
HY YH YHW, holy and awesome.
Blessed are You YWY, magnificent in the chambers of song.
(Ma’aseh Merkavah §551; Swartz 1992, 230)

In Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, heavenly beings are exhorted to praise, but no words are specified. The text seems to suggest that angels worship silently. Part of Song 12 reads:

... In the tabernacle knowledge, the [cheru]bim fall[1] before him and b[le]ss as they rise. A sound of divine stillness (קול דממת אלוהים)

[is heard] and (there is) a tumult of exultation (והמון רנה) as their wings lift up, the sound of divine [stillness]ss. ...

(And there is) a still sound of blessing in the tumult of their movement, and holy <> praise as they return on their ways. As they rise, they rise wondrously; and when they settle,

they [stand] still. The sound of exultant rejoicing falls silent, and (there is) a stillness of divine blessing in all the camps of the godlike beings; [and] the sound of laud[ing]

(Song 12:2-3, 7-8; 4Q405 20-22 ii 7-8, 12-13; Charlesworth & Newsom 1999, 183)

The implication is that the heavenly beings use their wings as organs of song. Halperin (1988b, 45) argues that this idea derives from Ezekiel 3:12-13, which can be read as an antiphonal performance of blessing, in which the wings of the hayyot are answered by the voice of the ‘ophannim:
I heard a great roaring sound: “Blessed is the Presence of the Lord, in His place,” with the sound of the wings of the creatures beating against one another, and the sound of the wheels (‘ophannim) beside them – a great roaring sound. (JPS translation)

_Sabbath Songs_ combines this tumult with “the still small voice” (קול דממה דקה) of 1 Kings 19:12. Allison suggests that the allusions to silence indicate “an awareness that the words of this world cannot plumb the depths of Godhead” (1988, 194). Knoll points out that the meaning of _demamah_ is not absolute silence but a very quiet voice: “We must therefore conclude that the angels are not silent but sing in a quiet voice” (1996, 25). He links this quiet voice to the angels’ priestly role, since the temple priestly cult was conducted in silence. “The compromise between the conflicting elements of the voice of song of the angels and the silence of the cult of the Priestly Temple appears in the description of the angels, who bless their Creator with a still and silent voice” (1996, 25). A tradition of silent angelic worship may also be reflected in the “gentle voice” (תִּחֹם גָּלֶֽאֶֽשִּׁים) of 2 Enoch 21:1 (longer recension). And allusions to 1 Kings 19:12 are to be found in the Hekhalot literature:

> And (the ḥayyot ha-qodesh) open their mouth in a great hymn, with fright, with trembling and shuddering, with fear and terror, in purity and holiness and with the soft murmuring sound, as it is written: after the earthquake (came the) soft murmuring sound.
> (_Hekhalot Rabbati_ §187; Schäfer 1992, 28)

What is the relationship between angelic praise in heaven and the worship of the human community on earth? In the ascent apocalypses, privileged human beings join the angelic priestly ranks. Newsom suggests that the effect of the poetry of _Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice_ was to enable a communal ascent:

> Although the Sabbath Shirot make no mention of actual translation of the human worshippers to the heavenly sphere, the vivid description of the heavenly realia create a virtual experience of presence in the heavenly temple. Consequently, those who experience the description of the merkabah share in an experience comparable in sacrality to the highly restricted entry of the high priest into the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement. (1987, 14-15)

She cautiously adds in a footnote, “Whether the cultivation of actual mystical experience lies behind the literary description of the celestial holy of holies is more difficult to say” (1987, 15 n.12). Morray-Jones is less cautious:
By performing the liturgical cycle, the worshippers undertake a “ritual journey,” which involves an “ascent” through the seven *debirim* (songs 1-7), followed by a detailed tour of the celestial temple, moving inwards towards the center, where the Glory manifests upon the throne. … The sacred structure within which this manifestation occurs has been constructed by means of (the) extended ritual performance. The worship of the holy community and its celestial, angelic counterpart is, so to speak, the substance of which the temple is composed. (2006, 166-7)

According to Chazon, the human worshippers “pray like the angels to a certain, but not a full, extent”: they maintain “the proper distinction between the two choirs, the one human and the other angelic” (2003, 43). But Alexander suggests “that she is underestimating the degree of progression in Sabbath Songs: while the choirs remain distinct at the beginning, by the end of the liturgy, on the twelfth and thirteenth Sabbaths, perhaps, they have merged” (2006a, 104). Fletcher-Louis objects to Newsom’s dualistic paradigm, arguing that “the place where all this liturgy and a communion between angels and men” took place was “the human community’s own, concrete, earthly cultic space” (2002, 274). He sees “the references to angels, elohim, elim, and so on” as referring “to the sectarians themselves” (1998, 372). But he then uses ascent language himself:

Like the apocalypses and the Hekhalot texts the Sabbath Songs do envisage the possibility of a human ascent from earth to heaven, and it is within this context that a human transformation and a sharing of the life of the angels and of that of God himself takes place. … In the Sabbath Songs ascent is a ritualised and communal experience … (2002, 392)

Schäfer criticises Morray-Jones for interpreting Qumran literature in the light of the Hekhalot texts, saying that he “improperly confuses the textual level (the heavenly ritual) and the performative level (the enacting of the text in the worship of the sectarians)” (2009, 144). He insists that “the Qumran literature describes an experience sui generis”, but concludes,

We definitely and most conspicuously do find the idea of the *unio liturgica* – the liturgical union or, better, the communion of humans and angels. This feature connects the Qumran evidence with the ascent apocalypses and the Hekhalot literature. (2009, 348-9)

One way in which the liturgical communion between humans and angels is expressed is by the recital of the *Qedushah*/Sanctus. This started as a heavenly song (Isa 6:3, cf. Rev 4:8), but made its way into earthly liturgies, as human communities sought to imitate angelic worship. The origins of the use of the *Qedushah*/Sanctus in earthly liturgies, whether Jewish or Christian, are difficult to recover. The earliest Jewish reference to the *Qedushah* in synagogue worship comes in the Tosefta (*t. Berakhot* 1:9),

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usually dated to around 400 (Neusner & Sarason 1977-1986, 1.ix). There is reliable
evidence for Christian use of the Sanctus, in the context of the Eucharistic prayer, from
the fourth century onwards. Gregory contributes to this with his sermon Against Those
Who Defer Baptism:

Join with the mystical [i.e. baptized] people and learn secret words. Say with us
those things that also the six-winged Seraphim say, singing a hymn of praise with
the initiated Christians. (GNO 10,2.362.15-17; Taft 1991-2, 2.104)

There are other clear references in Cyril/John of Jerusalem, the Apostolic Constitutions
and John Chrysostom. Earlier Christian texts alluding to the Sanctus (such as 1 Clement
34:6-7; the Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas 12.2; Tertullian Prayer 3.3) describe the
heavenly choir, without unequivocal reference to earthly liturgy. Thus the evidence for
the use of the Qedushah/Sanctus in both synagogue and church is roughly
contemporaneous, although in both cases the texts may well be reflecting practices which
had been established for some time. In fourth century Christians were building
monumental churches, and developing elaborate rituals performed by a priestly caste.

Langer argues that “in response, Jews looked for a similar religious leadership, a
heightened liturgical experience, and a sanctified setting in which this could all take
place. … The two institutions were in direct competition” (2004, 433). Claiming to
worship with the angels was part of that competition.

In 3 Enoch, Enoch ascends to heaven and joins in the heavenly Qedushah:

The Holy One, blessed be he, opened to me gates of Šekinah … He enlightened by
eyes and my heart to utter psalm, praise, jubilation, thanksgiving, song, glory,
majesty, laud, and strength. And when I opened my mouth and sang praises before
the throne of glory the holy creatures below the throne of glory and above the
throne responded after me, saying, “Holy, holy, holy”, and, “Blessed be the glory
of the Lord in his dwelling place.” (1:11-12; §2; Alexander 1983, 256)

Schäfer argues that although ostensibly this is about Enoch worshipping in heaven, the
text is in fact validating earthly synagogue worship:

The Merkavah mystic participates in the liturgy of the heavenly court.
Significantly, it is not he who joins the singing of the angels. Rather, the angels
answer his singing, which is infused in him by God, with the Trisagion of Isaiah
6:3 and with Ezekiel 3:12, thus with nothing but the liturgy which is performed on
earth in synagogues. (1988a, 287)

Other passages in Hekhalot literature stress the importance of the earthly Qedushah:

Blessed are you [pl.] unto heaven and earth,
you who ascend to the Chariot,
when you tell and proclaim to my sons
what I do at the morning, afternoon, and evening prayer,
on every day and at every hour,
when Israel speaks the ‘Holy, [holy, holy]’ before me.
teach them and tell them:
Raise your eyes to heaven opposite your house of prayer
when you speak the ‘Holy, [holy, holy]’ before me.
For I have no joy in my world,
which I created,
except at the hour in which your eyes are raised to my eyes,
and in my eyes to your eyes,
[namely] in the hour in which you speak before me
the ‘Holy, [holy, holy]’! (Hekhalot Rabbati §163; Schäfer 1988a, 287-8)

And so Schäfer concludes,

The Merkavah mystic represents in his person the participation of Israel in the heavenly liturgy and simultaneously confirms for the earthly congregation that it stands in direct contact with God in its synagogue liturgy, a contact which God needs just as much as Israel does. (1988a, 287)

Elior too stresses the mediating role of the elite ‘descenders to the merkavah’. They see “themselves as the people's mystical messengers, maintaining the link between the terrestrial and celestial worlds after the destruction (of the Temple)” (1997, 267).

Schäfer sees the Bavli’s exposition of ‘the work of creation’ as polemic against attempts “to actually ascend to heaven and see God on his throne” (2009, 224). In its inventory of the heavens, the description of the fifth heaven, Ma’on, which contains companies of ministering angels, is interrupted. The ministering angels are said to utter song by night but remain silent during the day “for the sake of Israel’s glory” (b. Hag. 12b), based on Psalm 42:9: “By day the Lord commands his steadfast love; and at night his song is with me”. A series of rabbinic comments are added in which the ‘song’ of the biblical verse becomes “the Torah, the epitome of the rabbinic value system, and God’s mercy upon Israel during the day is the result of the righteous’ Torah study at night” (Schäfer 2005, 45). In the Hekhalot texts, human beings ascend to heaven and join the angelic liturgy. In the Bavli, angels and humans worship in parallel, in their separate spheres.

Moreover, Israel is even more important to God than the angels who dwell with him in heaven. Or, to put it differently and more pungently, Torah study and praise of God are Israel's only task, not the attempt to equal the angels and aspire to be like them in the heavens. (Schäfer 2005, 56)

Gregory too depicts the earthly and heavenly communities worshipping in parallel. Like the Bavli, he is concerned to validate mainstream community worship. Heavenly worship is described not as an incentive for individuals to try and ascend to heaven, but as the model for earthly worship. Unlike the Bavli, however, Gregory sees heavenly worship as superior, and looks forward to the time when angels and humans will be reunited.
4.8.5 Conclusions

Gregory presents the altars of the heavenly tabernacle as representing the adoration of the angelic priests. In depicting the heavenly powers as priests, he is doing nothing new: it is a longstanding tradition going back to 1 Enoch 14 and Daniel 7. In allocating two altars to the heavenly tabernacle, and talking of heavenly sacrifice, however, Gregory is unusual. The two altars come about because he is following the Exodus account of the tabernacle. Other heavenly ascent texts do not draw the parallelism with the earthly tabernacle/temple so closely. They imply that there is only one heavenly altar, with more of the characteristics of the earthly incense altar. Other than in Hebrews, sacrifices, and their association with blood, are not deemed appropriate to heaven. Gregory, however, is able to draw on the Pauline reinterpretation of sacrifice, itself with Jewish roots, as prayer and righteous deeds. The angelic beings offer praise and prayer. Gregory never quotes from Revelation, and does not even seem to be alluding to it, yet its picture of heaven, with the adoring elders falling down before the throne, and the offering of prayers as incense, is there in the background. Gregory does not specify the content of the angelic song, which seems strange, as we know that he is aware of the Sanctus, sung before the Eucharist, as the song of the seraphim. Although he describes both heavenly and earthly worship, each in the context of their respective tabernacle, he keeps the two strictly separate. There are few verbal links between the two descriptions, the most obvious being εὐωδία, ‘fragrance’. He applies the second half of Hebrews 13:15, the ‘fruit of lips’, to heavenly worship, and the first half, the ‘sacrifice of praise’ to earthly worship. This separation is in contrast to other heavenly ascent texts. In Revelation the incense offered in heaven is the prayer of the righteous, whereas in Life of Moses the heavenly incense seems to be the prayer and praise of the angels themselves. In the ascent apocalypses and the Hekhalot texts human beings join the worship of heaven; Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice gives the impression that the earthly community feels itself to be in the presence of the praising angels. In Life of Moses, however, there is no suggestion that Moses becomes involved with the heavenly worship. He sees the heavenly tabernacle, and realizes that it consists of heavenly powers, but is not drawn into it. The closest parallel is with the Babylonian Talmud: there too heaven and earth worship separately. The Talmud implies that Israel’s worship takes priority, whereas there is no doubt that for Gregory, angelic worship is superior. He mentions morning and evening prayer in connection with earthly worship, but gives the impression that angelic worship is timeless. There is no eschatological thrust in the Bavli. Gregory, on
the other hand, envisages a reunion at the end of time when angels and human will worship together. In the meanwhile, there is the earthly tabernacle, the church. Gregory uses his description of the heavenly tabernacle not to encourage others to follow Moses, but to validate earthly worship.
4.9 The holy of holies

If the interior, which is called the Holy of Holies, is not accessible to the multitude, let us not think that this is at variance with the sequence of what has been perceived. For the truth of reality is truly a holy thing, a holy of holies, and is incomprehensible and inaccessible to the multitude (τοῖς πολλοῖς). Since it is set in the secret and ineffable areas of the tabernacle of mystery, the apprehension of the realities above comprehension should not be meddled with (ἀπολυπραγμόνητος): one should rather believe that what is sought does exist, not that it lies visible to all, but that it remains in the secret and ineffable areas of the intelligence. (Vit. Moys. 2.188)

4.9.1 Life of Moses 2.188 and its biblical context

According to the instructions given to Moses on Mount Sinai, the tabernacle tent was to be divided by a veil, creating the holy place (קדשׁ וקדשּׁים) and the holy of holies (קדשׁ שׁהקדשׁים) (Ex 26:33). The dimensions of the tent are unclear; they have to be estimated from the measurements of the קרשׁים (beams or frames?) and curtains. Most scholars settle on dimensions of 30 cubits in length, 10 in width and 10 in height for the tent as a whole (1 cubit being about 45 cm), making the holy of holies a cube 10 cubits in each direction. The high priest was to enter the holy of holies only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, as set out in Leviticus 16. Inside it would have been pitch dar. Hurowitz argues that the same was true of the devir in Solomon’s temple, as indicated by Solomon’s declaration in his dedication prayer: “The Lord has said that he would dwell in thick darkness (בערפל)” (1 Kgs 8:12). He comments that this “resembles statements in Mesopotamian texts describing temples as dark inside” (2007, 77). To this darkness, Knohl adds silence, arguing that

The Temple may ... be described as a series of concentric circles. The inner circle is that of the priests, in which the sacred service is conducted in absolute silence; the outer circle is that of the folk prayers of the people; while in the middle is the circle of the song of the Levites. (1996, 23)

In the dark, silent holy of holies of the tabernacle stood the ark, with two golden cherubim adorning its cover. God promises Moses, “There I will meet with you, and

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87 In the biblical text, קרשׁים and קדשׁ do not serve as consistent technical terms. In the description of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16, for example, the inner sanctum is designated קדשׁ (Lev 16:2-3, 16, 20, 23). See Haran (1965, 213 n.52).

88 See, for example, Cross (1947, 62), Haran (1965, 193-4) or Sarna (1991, 169-171). Friedman disagrees, suggesting instead that the tent is 20 cubits long, 8 wide, and 10 high. He also doubts whether the parokhet is a hanging veil, arguing that it is a canopy over the ark (1980, 243-4).
from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you ...” (Ex 25:22). The devir of Solomon’s temple contained two gigantic olive-wood cherubim overlaid with gold; the ark stood under their outstretched wings (1 Kgs 6:23-8; 8:6-7). 1 Chronicles 28:18 refers to the “the golden chariot of the cherubim”. By the time of the second temple, the ark had disappeared, leaving the holy of holies empty.89

The imagery of the holy of holies plays a significant part in Gregory’s thought, appearing in several of his works. He says of the seventh beatitude,

All the Beatitudes previously made known to us upon this mountain ... are sacred and holy every one, but ... the unentered sanctuary (ἄδυτον) which is now the subject of our study is very truly also a holy of holies (ἁγιον ἁγίων). (Beat. 7; GNO 7,2.149; Hall 2000, 75)

and of Song of Songs,

Now let us enter the Holy of Holies (τῶν ἁγίων τῶν ἁγίων), Song of Songs. In the expression ‘Holy of Holies’ we are taught a certain superabundance and exaggeration of holiness. Through the title Song of Songs the noble text also promises to teach us the mystery of mysteries. (Cant. 1; GNO 6.26.11-2; McCambley 1987, 48-9)

He is particularly fond of the term ἄδυτον: the innermost shrine, not to be entered. As set out in 4.2.1, he uses it to refer to the darkness of Mount Sinai and the tabernacle as a whole (in the plural), as well as to the holy of holies. On the Lord’s Prayer treats the entrance of the high priest into the holy of holies as an allegory of prayer. Here the ἄδυτον is “the hidden inner chamber of our heart” (Or. dom. 3; GNO 7,2.32; Graef 1954, 46); and the Lord’s Prayer is the petition “which the person within the sanctuary (τῶν ἐντός τῶν ἄδυτων γενόμενον) has been ordered to offer to God” (Or. dom. 3; GNO 7,2.33; Graef 1954, 47). Gregory interprets ἄδυτον as meaning “impenetrable to evil and inaccessible to vile thoughts” (Or. dom. 3; GNO 7,2.32; Graef 1954, 46). On the Lord’s Prayer is thought to be one of Gregory’s early works,90 and here ἄδυτον does not have the same connotation of mystery as in Life of Moses or On the Song of Songs. In Life of Moses, Gregory’s commentary on the heavenly tabernacle does not refer to the holy of holies, only to the cherubim covering the mysteries in the ark with their wings; but it plays a significant role in his interpretation of the earthly tabernacle. It represents “the truth of reality (ἡ τῶν ὑπὲρ κατάληψιν ἐντων): “realities above comprehension (τῶν ὑπὲρ κατάληψιν ἐντων)”, which are not accessible to the multitude (τοῖς πολλοῖς).

89 See Josephus, Jewish War 5.219.

90 Daniélou (1966, 162).
Is it possible to enter an ἄδυτον? When talking of Moses entering the darkness, Gregory uses the paradoxical expression Πρὸς γὰρ τὸ ἄδυτον τῆς θείας μυσταγωγίας παραδείσει (1.46). He says that David “was initiated into the mysteries in the same inner sanctuary (ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ ἄδυτῳ)” (2.164) and that Paul “entered the supercelestial sanctuary (ἐν τοῖς ὑπερουρανίοις ἄδυτοι)” (2.178). In his Funeral Oration on Meletius he declares, “The priest is within the holy place (ἐν τοῖς ἄδυτοις). He is entered into that within the veil (εἰς τὰ ἐνδέτερα τοῦ καταπετάσματος), whither our forerunner Christ has entered for us” (GNO 9.454; NPNF² 5.516). In On the Song of Songs he invites each person to leave behind the material world, and “enter into the inner sanctuary (τὸ ἄδυτον) of the mysteries revealed in this book” (GNO 6.25; McCambley 1987, 48). As all these examples show, the ἄδυτον is not impenetrable: it is the summit of spiritual achievement. Moses enters the ἄδυτον of the darkness, where he sees the ἄδυτα of the heavenly tabernacle. There are, however, mysteries in the ark, covered by the cherubim’s wings; even he does not have access to everything. But the message of 2.188 is different: here the emphasis is on the inaccessibility of the holy of holies to the multitude.

4.9.2 Alexandrian context

Philo saw the holy of holies as symbolic of the noetic world, and placed within it his hierarchy of divine powers. Like Gregory, he refers to it as τὸ ἄδυτον (e.g. Mos. 2.87); he also uses τὰ ἄδυτα with reference to both rooms within the tabernacle tent (e.g. Mos. 2.82). In his description of Moses’ ascent into the thick darkness in On the Posterity of Cain, he describes that darkness as representing “conceptions regarding the Existent Being that belong to the unapproachable region (τὰς ἄδυτους) where there are no material forms” (14). But he does not make as much use of the symbolism of the holy of holies as does Gregory.

Clement maps heavenly ascent onto the floor plan of the tabernacle/temple. The goal of the gnostic, therefore, is to enter the holy of holies. His first reference to this entrance suffers from textual variation. Wilson translates Miscellanies 5.34.7 as:

Now the Lord, having come alone into the intellectual world, enters by His sufferings (διὰ τῶν παθῶν), introduced into the knowledge of the Ineffable, ascending above every name which is known by sound. (1869, 241)

Van den Hoek, by omitting a διά, produces:

He alone will come (εἴσεισι) into the intellectual world (τῶν νοητῶν κόσμων) who has become lord over his emotions (ὁ κύριος γενόμενος ... τῶν παθῶν), reaching the
knowledge of the ineffable (ἐς τὴν τοῦ ἄρρητου γνώσιν) and ascending above every name that is made known by the sound of a voice. (1988, 126, similarly Le Boulluec’s French translation)

Le Boulluec comments,

Comme le montre l’allusion à Phil. 2,9, « au-dessus de tout nom », cette entrée mystique est celle du Christ ; mais il sert de modèle, et de moteur, à l’entrée du croyant dans la « gnose », comme l’indique l’emploi du futur, εἴσεισι. (1981, 2.142)

This is confirmed by the ending of Clement’s tabernacle interpretation, which introduces Leviticus 16. The high priest becomes a symbol of the perfect, gnostic Christian:

… distinguishing the objects of the intellect from the things of sense, rising above the other priests, hasting to the entrance of the noetic realm, to wash himself from the things here below, not in water as formerly one was cleansed on being enrolled in the tribe of Levi, but already by the Gnostic Word. (Strom. 5.39.4; van den Hoek 1988, 141)

Once “sanctified both in word and life”, the “spiritual and perfect man” receives “the ineffable (ἀπόρρητον) inheritance” “which eye has not seen and ear has not heard and which has not entered into the heart of man” (1 Cor 2:9). He becomes son and friend and is replenished “with insatiable contemplation (ἀκορέστου θεωρίας) face to face” (Strom. 5.40.1; van den Hoek 1988, 141). Paragraph 40.3 makes clear the connection between the gnostic’s ascent and Christ’s descent:

But in one way, as I think, the Lord puts off and puts on by descending into the realm of sense, and in another, he who through Him has believed puts off and puts on, as the apostle intimated, the consecrated stole. (van den Hoek 1988, 141)

Another description of the entrance of the high priest into the holy of holies is to be found in §27 of Excerpts from Theodotus. There it is used to describe the ascent of the gnostic soul to the highest level of the celestial hierarchy:

Now the soul, stripped by the power of him who has knowledge, as if it had become a body of the power, passes into the spiritual realm and becomes now truly rational and high priestly, so that it might now be animated, so to speak, directly by the Logos, just as the archangels become the high-priests of the angels and the First-Created the high-priests of the archangels. (Casey 1934, 61)

Not only is the soul animated by the Logos, it becomes a Logos:

… having transcended the angelic teaching and the Name taught in Scripture, it comes to the knowledge and comprehension of the facts. It is no longer a bride but has become a Logos and rests with the bridegroom together with the First-Called and First-Created … (Casey 1934, 61)

Lilla suggests that when Clement wrote Miscellanies 5.39.3 – 40.1 “he had still in mind paragraph 27 of the Excerpta as well as other passages of Gnostic writings dealing with the topic of the entry of the High Priest into the Holy of Holies” (1971, 180), and, as a result, his exegesis “plunges directly into Gnosticism” (1971, 181). Kovacs agrees that
“this part of the Stromateis betrays strong gnostic influence”, but argues that Lilla “has misconstrued the relation of the two exegeses to each other” (1997, 433). She suggests that the treatment of the high priest in Excerpts from Theodotus 27 supplements Clement’s earlier exegesis in Miscellanies 5, “by providing a picture of the last stage of the soul’s ascent, after it has been fully instructed and purified and ascended through the angelic ranks” (1997, 437). In Miscellanies Clement stresses “the importance of the incarnation and of the other modes of divine revelation in creation and the history of salvation” (1997, 437); but once the gnostic soul has entered within the veil of the noetic world, into the very depths of God, it “has passed beyond the revelation given in the incarnation and even beyond the superior teaching of the angels to become one with the Logos, the ‘face’ of God” (1997, 437). Clement “unambiguously proposes a sharp distinction between Christians at different levels of understanding” (Williams 1979, 34).

Entry into the holy of holies is only for the enlightened gnostic, not for ordinary believers, although this “distinction between the different kinds of believer is certainly not fixed permanently. The gnostic’s task is to make more gnostics” (Williams 1979, 35).

In Homilies on Exodus, Origen develops an elaborate anthropological interpretation of the tabernacle, in which each believer is expected to “complete a form of the tabernacle in himself” (Hom. Exod. 9.4; Heine 1982, 341). He sees the furniture of the tabernacle and the high priest’s vestments as symbolic of Christian virtues. The aim of adorning the inner person as a high priest to God is so as to be able “to enter not only the sanctuary (sancta), but also the Holy of Holies (sancta sanctorum)”: The sanctuary can be those things which a holy way of life can have in the present world. But the Holy of Holies, which is entered only once, is, I think, the passage to heaven, where the mercy seat and the cherubim are located and where God will be able to appear to the pure in heart ... (Hom. Exod. 9.4; Heine 1982, 344)

For Origen, the holy of holies is the vision of God after death.

4.9.3 Theological context

Modern scholars display a variety of interpretative strategies with regard to Gregory’s use of holy of holies imagery. There is a tendency to apply the definition of the ἅδυτον as “the hidden inner chamber of our heart” from On the Lord’s Prayer to all other texts in which Gregory mentions it. So Daniélou:

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91 Lilla assigns Excerpts from Theodotus 27 to a Valentinian writer, Kovacs to Clement. See 3.2.3.
Les ἄδυτα représentent l’intérieur, τὸ ἐνδότατον. Mais ici ce n’est pas le lieu le plus retiré du Temple, mais le plus profond de l’âme, la chambre secrète. … C’est … la réalité mystique du sanctuaire de l’âme où Dieu habite et où l’âme doit pénétrer pour le trouver et vivre dans sa familiarité. (1954, 184)

Although he places the tabernacle within the second stage of his outline of Gregory’s mysticism, he makes ἄδυτον one of the significant words characterising the third stage: “comme le lieu où se consomme l’union de l’âme avec Dieu et où l’âme contemple Dieu dans la ténèbre” (1954, 185). He draws attention to the accumulation of negative terms in Life of Moses 2.188, seeing them as designating transcendence. But he insists that this transcendence is to be linked with interiority: “C’est l’union de l’un et de l’autre qui characterise précisément la vie mystique” (1954, 187). Laird draws attention to the way in which Gregory prioritises faith over comprehension:

The function of grasping the Beloved in union, that is to say, the faculty which bridges the gap between intelligence and God, is reserved by Gregory of Nyssa for faith. (2004, 62)

And illustrates this with two passages from Life of Moses describing Moses’ experience on Mount Sinai:

... the one who is going to associate intimately with God must go beyond all that is visible and (lifting up his own mind, as to a mountaintop, to the invisible and incomprehensible) believe that the divine is there where the understanding does not reach. (1.46; Laird 2004, 79-81)

... in the impenetrable darkness draw near to God by your faith ... (2.315; Laird 2004, 83-85)

He goes on to comment on Gregory’s sixth homily in On the Song of Songs. There Gregory is interpreting Song of Songs 3:1-4, in which the bride rises from her bed at night and wanders about in the city searching for the one whom her soul loves. When she finds him, she will not let him go until she has brought him into her mother’s house. Gregory equates the night with the darkness of Mount Sinai, also quoting Psalm LXX 17:12 (GNO 6.181.7-8). He paraphrases the bride’s words as follows:

Now that I have been deemed worthy of the nuptial rites, I rest as it were upon the bed of all that I have hitherto understood. But I am suddenly introduced into the realm of the invisible, surrounded by the divine darkness, searching for Him Who is hidden in the dark cloud. Then it was that I felt that love for Him Whom I desired - though the Beloved Himself resists the grasp of our thoughts (τῶν λογισμῶν τὴν λαβήν). (GNO 6 181.10-16; Musurillo 2001, 201)

She rises again, and searches “the entire spiritual and transcendent world (τὴν νοητὴν τε καὶ ὑπερκόσμιον φύσιν)” (GNO 6.182.5-6; Musurillo 2001, 202); but it is only when she forsakes “every finite mode of comprehension (πᾶσαν καταληπτικὴν ἔφοδον)” (GNO 6.183.7; Musurillo 2001, 202) that she finds her Beloved by faith:
And I will never let Him go, now that I have found Him, from the grasp of faith (τῇ τῆς πίστεως λαβῇ), until He comes within my chamber. For the heart is indeed a chamber to be filled by the divine indwelling ... (GNO 6.183.8-12; Musurillo 2001, 202)

Laird comments, “The Beloved is ungraspable on the level of mind but is clearly graspable on the level of faith” (2004, 90). His interpretation of Life of Moses 2.188 follows similar lines: “The mind itself is the temple, comprehension is the multitude which cannot enter the sanctuary” (2004, 82). Laird is equating the holy of holies with “the secret chamber of the heart” thanks to On the Lord’s Prayer (2003, 84; cf. 2004, 82 n.102); and assuming that, because Gregory identifies Song of Songs with the holy of holies, the philosophy presented in On the Song of Songs of abandoning “noetic-erotic control in order to enter the hidden sanctuary” (2003, 85) can be applied to the holy of holies in Life of Moses. This ignores the context of Life of Moses 2.188: Gregory is talking of the earthly tabernacle, not the heavenly one. Does he really intend ‘the multitude’ to be taken allegorically, as comprehension; or is he not rather talking of the multitude of ordinary believers?

Lim is interested in Gregory’s political agenda. He argues that more was at stake between Gregory and Eunomius than theology alone. Gregory not only criticised Eunomius’ use of ἀγέννητος to describe the essence of God, he also launched a vituperative personal attack upon him, describing him as:

The one who turned the championing of doctrine into a means of income, who slipped into houses uninvited, neither disguising his disgusting affliction by his personal conduct nor having regard to the natural revulsion of healthy persons towards such, he who according to the ancient law because of contact with the mark is expelled from the populated encampment. Impetuous moreover and violent and liar ... (Eun. 1.103; GNO 1.57; Hall 1988, 50)

Eunomius was from an undistinguished family of “farmers, craftsmen, and small entrepreneurs” (Van Dam 2003a, 18). Gregory, on the other hand, came from a wealthy landed family, probably of the curial class.92 “It is arguable that this social gulf separated the Cappadocians and Eunomius more effectively and irreconcilably than any amount of theological and philosophical disagreement” (Lim 1995, 142). Lim argues that “before Constantine, many Christian apologists had taken pride in the fact that even uneducated and nearly illiterate Christians were able to discuss supramundane topics, hitherto the exclusive preserve of upper-class philosophers”. Now, however, “the via universalis had become problematic for many Christians” (1995, 151). In particular, bishops did not take kindly to having their doctrines questioned by social upstarts.

92 See Kopecek (1973) and Rapp (2000).
A key word in *Life of Moses* 2.188 is the adjective ἀπολυπραγμόνητος – not to be meddled with. Gregory can use πολυπραγμοσύνη and cognate words in a positive sense. He does so in *Life of Moses* 2.163:

For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, (the mind) keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence’s yearning for understanding (πολυπραγμοσύνη) it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge …

Here it describes “the dynamic quality of the mind that allows it to penetrate into the incomprehensible where God is seen” (Laird 2003, 92 n.30). However, in commenting on the departure from Egypt, when the Israelites were to burn any leftovers from the passover lambs, Gregory writes,

The food placed before us … I call the warm and fervent faith which we receive without having given thought to it. We devour as much of it as is easily eaten, but we leave aside the doctrine concealed in the thoughts which are hard and tough without investigating it thoroughly or seeking to know more about it (ἀπολυπραγμόνητον). Instead we consign this food to the fire. (2.109)

Here, as in the paragraph on the holy of holies in the earthly tabernacle, there is reference to not displaying *polupragmosunē* – meddlesome curiosity. Gregory continues,

Such thoughts as are beyond our understanding – like the questions, What is the essence of God? What was there before the creation? What is there outside the visible world? Why do things which happen happen? and other such things as are sought out by inquiring minds – these things we concede to know only by the Holy Spirit, who reaches the depths of God, as the Apostle says. (2.110)

Like Origen before him, Gregory often appeals to 1 Corinthians 2:10. But, according to Heine, whereas “Origen believes his own interpretation of Scripture (to be) guided by the Spirit”, Gregory is more circumspect and “disclaims such guidance for himself” (1984, 362). Instead he justifies his interpretations by reference to Paul, who had the necessary spiritual understanding. This reference to Paul is particularly prominent in Gregory’s tabernacle interpretation, because he believes that Paul had a vision of the tabernacle. Those who have not had such a vision, and who are not guided by the Holy Spirit, should not presume to discuss thoughts which are hard and tough. Lim argues that “idle curiosity and a spirit of meddling” (1995, 163) caused deep concern to fourth century bishops such as the Cappadocians and John Chrysostom. They opposed those who acquired for themselves, and who also helped others to acquire, the ability to ask acute theological questions not through a systematic training in philosophy but through the use of manuals and other shortcuts. They circumvented a system of long and difficult apprenticeship that cultivated a student’s sense of social responsibility. (1995, 164)
It was in order to muzzle people who challenged episcopal authority by engaging in
de public theological disputations that the nature of the divine essence as represented as “a
mystery ringed by taboos” (1995, 169). Gregory is not always as negative about
πολυπραγμοσύνη as Lim implies. But his references to “the multitude” in 2.188 are not
allegorical. Gregory’s sense of the mystery and incomprehensibility surrounding God
had social consequences.

O’Connell notes that there are “two distinct yet interrelated spiritual journeys”
described in Life of Moses: that of the people of Israel and that of Moses (1983, 302).
Initially, in the sections leading up to Sinai, they are complementary; but after Moses’
ascent they diverge. The people are aiming for the Promised Land, the reward for
virtuous living; but Moses “is beyond the need for a hope of reward as a motivation for
virtue” (1983, 321). His “goal is nothing other than God Himself” (1983, 322). Unlike
Lim, O’Connell does not correlate the difference with socio-political realities:

This distinction was based not on any rigid classification of two types of Christian,
but on Gregory’s pragmatic observation that those who aspire to the perfect life are
relatively rare: all had the same preparation, but not all ascended the mountain.
The reader is encouraged to identify with and imitate the journey of Moses, who
did aspire to perfection. (1983, 323)

He does, however, stress that Moses’ elevation above the Israelites confers responsibility:
“Contemplation is no privatized, individualistic accomplishment, but the God-given
insight and ability to teach, heal and lead others” (1983, 323). This is nowhere better
illustrated than by Moses’ experience on Mount Sinai. Once he emerged out of the
darkness,

(Moses) then went down to his people to share with them the marvels which had
been shown to him in the theophany, to deliver the laws, and to institute for them
the sanctuary and priesthood according to the pattern shown to him on the
mountain. … But the people prevented grace: Before giving heed to the lawgiver
they rebelled in idolatry. (Vit. Moys. 1.56-7)

Gregory sees this as the typology which was imitated by such model bishops as Gregory
Thaumaturgus and Basil:

He was filled with a certain boldness and confidence through that vision, like an
athlete who, since he has enough experience through competition and strength from
training, strips confidently for the race and prepares for combat against his
competitors. (Thaum. GNO 10,1.19-20; Slusser 1998, 55)

Many times we perceived that he also was in the dark cloud wherein was God. For
what was invisible to others, to him (was) the initiation into the mysteries of the
Spirit made visible, so that he seemed to be within the compass of the dark cloud in
which knowledge about God was concealed. Many times he arrayed himself
against the Amalecites, using prayer as his shield. And when he raised his hands,
the true Jesus conquered His enemy. (Bas. GNO 10,1.129; Stein 1928, 47-9)
Leaders, however, by definition, are in a minority. Gregory clearly does not expect the majority to gain access to the holy of holies.

4.9.4 Heavenly ascent context

In heavenly ascent texts, the equivalent to the holy of holies – the epicentre of holiness, where the glory of God is to be found – is the merkavah. It is usually assumed that the goal of heavenly ascent was to obtain a vision of the divine glory upon the merkavah throne. However, both in Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice and the Hekalot texts, this vision fails to materialise:

The whole thrust of the Songs is towards the climactic vision of God: as each song moves ever closer to the ultimate mystery, anticipation mounts, but when the climax is reached the description seems to have been astonishingly perfunctory. Because of the damaged state of the text, the final vision of God is, unfortunately, missing, but reconstruction suggests that it cannot have been elaborate. (Alexander 2006b, 358)

Schäfer comments on the way in which terms used by Ezekiel to describe the divine human-like figure on the throne, such as hashmal and nogah, are assigned to the angelic spirits in song 12:

5 ... Like the appearance of fire (are) the spirits of holiest holiness round about, the appearance of streams of fire like electrum (בדמות חשמל). And (there are) works of

6 [r[a]diance (מתעטש].) with glorious mingled colors ...

(4Q405 20-22 ii 10-11; Charlesworth & Newsom 1999, 182-3)

As he says,

What Ezekiel encounters as a vision of God has been transferred to the angels in Song XII. The angels move to center-stage; God’s physical appearance recedes into the background and is hardly mentioned at all. That which remains important is only his praise, not the vision of his shape. (2009, 138)

When it comes to the Hekhalot literature, Schäfer disagrees with Scholem:

What is the aim of this journey (the ascent of the Merkavah mystic)? Is it, as Scholem presumes, exclusively or at least primarily the vision of God on his throne? … The first surprising result of an examination of the texts is that the ascent accounts say almost nothing at all about what the mystic actually sees when he finally arrives at the goal of his wishes. The reader, who has followed the adept in his dangerous and toilsome ascent through the seven palaces, and whose expectations have been greatly raised is rather disappointed. (1988a, 285)

Even Aḥer does “not see God but an angel (albeit the highest angel in heaven)” (Schäfer 2009, 235). The diffidence about describing God is already there in earlier texts. Ezekiel only sees the figure on the chariot at three removes: “Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord” (Ezek 1:28). In I Enoch 14,
Enoch “does not see much of God: the narrative moves immediately from the Glory of the Great One seated on the throne to his garment” (Schäfer 2009, 61).

* B. Hagigah 14b-15b relates the story of the four who entered pardes:

Our masters taught: Four entered a garden, and these are they: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aher, and R. Akiba. “R. Akiba said to them, When you draw near the stones of pure marble, do not say, Water, water; for it is said, The speaker of lies shall not be established in My sight. Ben Azzai looked and died. … Ben Zoma looked and was smitten. … Aher cut the shoots. … R. Akiva ascended safely and descended safely. (Halperin 1980, 75-6)

The same story also appears, with variations, in the Tosephta, the Jerusalem Talmud, and the Hekhalot Literature. As Halperin points out, “there is no evidence specifically linking (the pardes story) with the merkabah, or suggesting that it originally referred to ecstatic mysticism of the Hekhalot type” (1980, 91). Schäfer suggests that the story started out referring to the rabbis being “initiated by God into the innermost mysteries of the Torah” (2009, 201). Already in the Tosephta, however, it appears as part of a ‘mystical collection’ (Halperin 1980, 65) attached to m. Hagigah 2:1, suggesting that the editors understood it as “referring to the exegesis of the Merkavah” (Schäfer 2009, 201). The enigmatic sentence about the stones of pure marble does not appear in the Tosephta or the Yerushalmi. Schäfer argues that it is a truncated version of the ‘water episode’ in the Hekhalot literature (2009, 202), which the Bavli imported in order “to turn the pardes narrative into an ascent account” and “ensure that the reader would understand the entrance of the four rabbis into the ‘garden’ as an ascent to the Merkavah in heaven” (2009, 203). As such it becomes a warning of the dangers of ascent. The restriction in m. Hagigah 2:1 states that the chariot may not be expounded “in the presence of one, unless he is a sage (חכם) and understands of his own knowledge”. Morray-Jones points out that, of the four who entered pardes, only Aqiva was an ordained rabbi, a ḥakam according to rabbinic terminology. “The others, despite their great learning, were merely talmidei-ḥakamim and so their involvement in maʿašeh merkabah led them to disaster” (1993a, 195). Unlike Elisha b. Abuyah, Ben ʿAzza and Ben Zoma have a good press in rabbinic literature; all that they have done wrong is not to be ordained rabbis. The Bavli reports that in response to the second story of a child understanding ḥashmal and being burnt up, it was suggested that the book of Ezekiel should be consigned to a Genizah. But R. Joshua b. Gamala retorts, “If this one is a scholar (חכם), all are scholars!” (Ḥag.

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93 For details of the parallel versions see Halperin (1980, 86-88).
meaning that just because “a child (who is not a scholar) was burned does not mean that the book of Ezekiel is off limits for (real) scholars” (Schäfer 2009, 228 n.61). The holiest mysteries are to be kept for those in authority.

4.9.5 Conclusions

The holy of holies of the earthly tabernacle represents for Gregory the same mystery as climbing Mount Sinai to see the heavenly tabernacle – the ultimate mystery of God, and the coming of the believer into the presence of that mystery. He is drawing on the Alexandrian tradition of the holy of holies as the kosmos noëtos. Whereas for Clement gnosis is superior to pistis, and it is the gnostic who reaches the holy of holies, for Gregory the opposite is true: one encounters God by faith, not knowledge. In On the Lord’s Prayer he is happy to use the entrance of the high priest into the holy of holies as an allegory of prayer; but by Life of Moses he has become more reticent. Only the ‘superheroes’ of the faith – Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Paul, John – are able to enter the unenterable. And even Moses cannot see the mysteries shielded by the cherubim’s wings. For Origen the holy of holies is a symbol of the vision of God after death, and for the Valentinians entry into the Pleroma is the ultimate stage of salvation for the ‘spiritual’. Gregory too uses this symbolism for life after death in the Funeral Oration on Meletius. And one of his descriptions of the eschaton is of the dividing veil being removed. But in Life of Moses he is anxious to stress the never-ending nature of the quest to find God. The holy of holies, like the heavenly tabernacle as a whole, participates in the infinity of God. Therefore Gregory, unlike Clement, does not make use of Leviticus 16. The holy of holies does not provide an endpoint to the spiritual journey. The heavenly ascent texts too frustrate expectations. The promised merkavah never clearly appears. They do not have Gregory’s philosophical language, but they too imply that God is beyond human vision.

Theological mysteries have social consequences. The imagery of the holy of holies had already been used in the Alexandrian tradition to make distinctions between believers, witness Clement and the Valentinians. But with Gregory those distinctions became a matter of ecclesial authority. Lim demonstrates how, in a situation in which theological arguments were threatening to split the church, fourth century bishops became determined to cut off debate. They wanted the elucidation of the highest

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94 See Halperin (1980, 156 n.29) for the textual discrepancy between manuscripts and printed edition.

95 On the Soul and Resurrection PG 46.133C.
mysteries to be left to those in authority. Everyone else was to take them on faith. This comes out clearly in Gregory’s description of the place of the holy of holies within the earthly tabernacle. Hoi polloi are to keep out. Despite the differences in genre, there is a parallel with the treatment of the ‘work of creation’ and the ‘work of the chariot’ in b. Ḥagigah 11b - 16a. Just as Gregory turns the tabernacle into a manual of orthodoxy, so the rabbis ‘rabbinised’ ma‘aseh merkavah. For Gregory, ascent becomes theology, for the rabbis, exegesis. And both restrict access to ‘higher’ matters to those in positions of religious authority: Gregory stresses the inaccessibility of the holy of holies; the rabbis depict the dangers of trying to ascend to the merkavah.
4.10 The priestly vestments

The very names for the clothing keep most folk from an accurate contemplation of their details. What sort of material garments would be called rational, doctrine, or truth? Indeed, these names clearly illustrate that it is not the perceptible clothing which is traced by the history but a certain adornment of the soul woven by virtuous pursuits. (Vit. Moys. 2.190)

4.10.1 Life of Moses 2.189-201 and its biblical context

After being shown the pattern of the tabernacle, Moses is given instructions concerning Aaron’s vestments (Ex 28). Gregory devotes considerable space to these garments: five paragraphs (1.51-55) in the historia and thirteen paragraphs (2.189-201) in the theoria. His descriptions do not entirely tally with the LXX. Some of the technical terms he uses are different: neither the clasps (πορπαί, 1.52, 53) holding the ephod together nor the straps (τελαμῶνες, 2.200) tying the breastpiece to the arms appear in the LXX. Gregory refers to the golden platelet (πέταλον, 1.54, 2.189), but otherwise his vocabulary for the head piece (ταινία – turban, 1.55, 2.189; διάδημα – diadem, 2.201; στέφανος – crown, 2.201) differs from that of the LXX (μίτρα e.g. Ex 28:33 and κίδαρις e.g. Ex 28:4). The description of the way in which the breastpiece is attached to the ephod is particularly obscure in the MT (Ex 28:13-14, 22-28; 39:15-21), the LXX (Ex 28:13-14, 22-25; 36:22-29) and Life of Moses (1.53; 2.197); and the three accounts do not correlate. Gregory does not simply reproduce the LXX, or at least the LXX as we have it.96 He is either summarising and interpreting the data in his own words or he knows other traditions about the priestly garments. Philo (Mos. 2.109-135) does not account for the clasps, the straps, the turban or the description in 1.53 of “intertwined cords plaited through one another in a netlike pattern”. Gregory gives another allegorical interpretation of the priestly vestments in the third homily of On the Lord’s Prayer. Some of his vocabulary there differs again. The LXX once refers to the breastpiece (MT ﬂσ) as the περιστήθιον (Exodus 28:4). In Life of Moses, Gregory calls it the προστήθιον (2.189). In On the Lord’s Prayer, he uses περιστήθιος μίτρα (Or. dom. 3, GNO 7,2.31.9), despite the fact that the LXX uses μίτρα for the headpiece.97 On the Lord’s Prayer refers

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96 There are numerous problems about the LXX text, particularly as regards the making of the tabernacle and vestments in Exodus 36-40. See Wevers (1992, 117-46).

97 This has confused Graef: her translation refers to “the diadem (μίτρα) with the rays coming from precious stones” (1954, 45, translating GNO 7,2.32.1). There are no precious stones on the headpiece; μίτρα here refers to the περιστήθιος μίτρα (GNO 7,2.31.9), the breastpiece.
to three decorations on the hem of the robe: pomegranates, bells and flowers (ἄνθινα cf LXX 28:30, Philo Mos. 2.119);98 *Life of Moses* only has two: pomegranates and bells.

Gregory interprets the priestly clothing in terms of virtue. He has interpreted the heavenly tabernacle christologically, the earthly tabernacle ecclesiologically, and now he turns to the theme of ethical living. He first lists the clothing (2.189), and then proceeds to a detailed interpretation, beginning with the full-length robe. As with his interpretation of the tabernacle, quotations from the New Testament play an important role. His interpretation in *On the Lord’s Prayer*, which also equates the priestly vestments with “the graces of virtue” (3; GNO 7,2.31.24; Graef 1954, 45), can be seen as a preliminary version which he has revised and expanded, particularly by the addition of New Testament proof texts.

In 2.191 Gregory focuses on the full-length robe (μαξίμως; ποδήρης/ὑποδύτης). The high priest wore this underneath the ephod and the breastpiece, but over the tunic (κτήν; χιτών).99 The robe was blue (φόδα; ύακινθος). As part of his elaborate cosmological interpretation of the vestments, Philo declares it to be “an image of the air (ἄέρος ἐκμαγεῖον)” (Mos. 2.118). Gregory knows of this: “Some of those who before us have contemplated the passage say that the dye signifies the air (τὸν ἀέρα)”.100 Gregory is not here concerned with cosmology; but this interpretation is useful, because it enables him to talk of an airy tunic (τὸν ἀερώδη χιτῶνα), in contrast to the heavy and fleshy (παχείᾳ τινὶ καὶ πολυσάρκῳ) garment of life. In 2.185 Gregory talked of the church offering “the sacrifice of praise and the incense of prayer” in the earthly tabernacle. Here, the sacrifice required becomes purity of life. He quotes Romans 12:1 (“a living sacrifice and rational service”), and brings in 1 Thessalonians 4:17:

Reweaving this bodily nature, we should be close to what rises upwards and is light and airy (πρὸς τὸ ἀνωφερές τε καὶ κοῦφον καὶ ἐναέριον), in order that when we hear the last trumpet we may be found weightless and light in responding to the voice of the One who calls us. Then we shall be borne on high through the air to be together with the Lord, not drawn down to earth by anything heavy. (2.191)

98 Graef omits the flowers in her translations of GNO 7,2.31.11 and 32.7-8, although she does include them when translating GNO 7,2.32.13-14.

99 Malherbe and Ferguson confuse matters by translating ὑποδύτης, ποδήρης and χιτών by ‘tunic’ (cf. 2.189, 191, 194).

100 Wisdom, Josephus, and Clement all give cosmological interpretations of the robe, but only Philo equates it with the air. See Geljon (2002, 140).
References to the upward bearing (ἀνωφερής) and light (κοῦφος) nature of the virtuous soul, recalling the upward flight of the soul in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (246C), are frequent in his work, as are quotations of 1 Thessalonians 4:17. That verse is eschatological, and Gregory uses it as such, but he argues that if on the last day we wish to “be borne on high through the air”, then already now we need to don an “airy tunic”. In *Life of St Macrina*, he presents his sister and her community as having fulfilled this ideal:

Their existence bordered on both the human and the incorporeal nature. … they were not weighted down by the allures of the body, but, borne upwards in midair, they participated in the life of the celestial powers (ἀνωφερής τε καὶ μετέωρος ἦν αὐτῶν ἣ ζωὴ ταῖς οὐρανίαις συμμετεωροποροῦσα δυνάμει). (GNO 8,1.382.20 - 383.5; Callahan 1967, 171)

Their lives are “divorced from all mortal vanity and attuned to an imitation of the existence of the angels” (GNO 8,1.382.5-6; Callahan 1967, 171). In *Life of Moses*, Gregory brings together virtue with the light, airy garment of the priestly robe; he doesn’t explicitly mention angels. In *Life of St Macrina*, however, he makes the equation virtuous = light = angelic. At the resurrection,

You will see this bodily garment which is now dissolved by death woven again of the same elements, not according to is present crass and heavy construction, but with the thread resewn into something more fine and delicate … (An. et res.; PG 46.108A; Callahan 1967, 245)

The light and airy ‘garment’ represented by the priestly robe is the resurrection body, of which we can have a foretaste by living a virtuous life. Twice in *Life of Moses* 2.191 Gregory compares this robe to a spider’s web, the second time quoting Psalm 39:12 (LXX 38:12). Malherbe and Ferguson use the Jerusalem translation, which, in line with the MT, refers to a moth (Ψὐ). The LXX, however, translates this as ‘spider’ (ἀράχνης), thus giving Gregory a biblical proof text. He interprets the length of the robe as referring to the fullness of virtue. Elsewhere in his writings he argues both that in order to be virtuous it is necessary to “remain aloof from every evil” (Virg. 16; GNO 8,1.313; Callahan 1967, 53) and that all the virtues are “attached and dependent on each other” (Inst.; GNO 8,1.78.4-5; Callahan 1967, 151). According to Daniélou, this thesis of Gregory’s that it is necessary to have all the virtues comes from Basil (2000, 237 n.2).

From the colour and length of the robe, Gregory moves on to the bells and pomegranates attached to its hem. These “represent the brilliance of good works” (2.192). In the MT, two objects are attached to the robe’s hem: pomegranates of blue,
purple, and crimson yarns, and golden bells (Ex 28:33). The LXX turns these into three decorations: pomegranates made of variegated thread, golden pomegranates and bells (Ex 28:29(33)). The fabric pomegranates then become designated ἄνθινα – flower-like objects (Ex 28:30(34)), and as such are mentioned by both Philo (Mos. 2.119) and Gregory (Or. Dom. 3; GNO 7.2.31.11, 32.7-8, 32.14). Here in Life of Moses, however, Gregory only has two decorations: golden bells and pomegranates. This seems less likely to be a return to the MT as a picking and choosing of those elements which suit his interpretative purpose. When Moses first arrived in the darkness, he was taught that “religious virtue is divided into two parts, into that which pertains to the Divine and that which pertains to right conduct” (2.166). Gregory is referring there to the ten commandments, but the same two-fold structure returns here. Virtue is acquired through “faith toward the divine and conscience toward life”: “The great Paul adds these pomegranates and bells to Timothy's garment, saying he should have faith and a good conscience (1 Tim 1:19)” (2.192). There then follows the only reference to the Trinity in Gregory's tabernacle interpretation:

So let faith sound forth pure and loud in the preaching of the holy Trinity and let life imitate the nature of the pomegranate's fruit. (2.192)

Gregory allegorises pomegranates in terms of the philosophical life, which “although outwardly austere and unpleasant, is yet full of good hopes when it ripens” (2.193). He produces the same image three times in On the Song of Songs,103 thanks to the three references to pomegranates in Song of Songs (4:3,13; 6:7). In Life of Moses, he links the interpretation with Hebrews 12:11:

For somewhere the divine Apostle says that any punishment is most painful at the time, and far from pleasant (that is the first contact with the pomegranate): but later, in those on whom it has been used, it bears fruit in peace and goodness. This is the sweetness of the nourishment inside. (2.193)

The word ‘punishment’, which Malherbe and Ferguson take from the Jerusalem Bible translation, is misleading: the Greek, in both Hebrews and Life of Moses, is παιδεία. Education may involve painful discipline, but, as Gregory is pointing out, that is not its primary purpose. As well as interpreting biblical imagery, he is reinterpreting the Hellenistic ideals of paideia and the philosophical life in terms of Christian virtues.

Underneath the robe (מעיל; ποδήρης/ὑποδύτης), the high priest was to wear a tunic (כתנת; χιτών) (Ex 28:4). Here at 2.194 Gregory uses the right Greek word, but in 1.54 he

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103 Cant. 7 (GNO 6.229-31); 9 (GNO 6.282-83); 15 (GNO 6.455-46).
conflates the two garments. The MT describes the תְשׁבִּץ as חֹثָן (Ex 28:4), which possibly means ‘chequered’ or ‘fringed’, but the LXX translation is κοσμυμβωτόν – ‘tasselled’. Gregory says that “the tassels of the tunic are round pendants which serve no other purpose than decoration alone” (2.194). Therefore “virtue should not be measured only by what is required”, “we should discover something extra by our own endeavour, in order that some further adornment might be added to the garment” (2.194). He illustrates this by reference to Paul’s lifestyle, weaving together 1 Cor 9:13-14, 1 Cor 9:18, and 1 Cor 4:11:

For whereas the Law commands that the ministers serving in the Temple get their food from the Temple and those who preach the Gospel should get their living from the Gospel, Paul offers the Gospel without charge, being himself in hunger, and thirst, and naked. These are the beautiful tassels which adorn the tunic of the commandments by being added to it. (2.194)

From the tunic, Gregory moves on to the ephod (אפיון; ἐπωμίς), although he doesn’t call it that. In 1.52 he uses a plural form – ἐπωμίδες (which in 2.189 and 2.196 he uses for the shoulder pieces, as in LXX Ex 28:7, 8); in 2.189 he refers to the ἐπενδύτης (the overgarment, similar to Aquila’s translation ἐπένδυμα); and here in 2.195 he talks of two pieces of cloth (δύο πέπλοι) which “reached from the shoulders down the chest and down the back and were joined to one another by a clasp on each shoulder”. He lists the colours of the ephod, which are the same as those of the tabernacle curtains with the addition of gold thread. In 2.178 he has mentioned the cosmological interpretation of those colours,104 here he allegorises them in terms of virtues:

Now the violet is interwoven with purple, for kingliness is joined to purity of life. Scarlet is mixed with linen because the bright and pure quality of life in some way mingles with the redness of modesty. The gold which lends radiance to these colors foreshadows the treasure reserved for such a life. (2.196)

The clasps, with their engraved stones, enable Gregory to acknowledge the virtues of Old Testament figures:

The patriarchs engraved on the shoulders make a great contribution to our adornment, for men’s lives are adorned by the earlier examples of good men. (2.196)

“There is another adornment worn on top of these beautiful cloths” (2.197). Gregory is referring to the breastpiece. The יַשְׁנָה of the MT was translated by the LXX as περιστήθιον (something around the chest) at Exodus 28:4, and as λόγιον (oracle)

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104 Cf. Philo Mos. 2.88; Josephus Ant. 3.183; Clement Strom. 5.32.3; Origen Hom. Exod. 13.3.
elsewhere. One manuscript tradition has λογεῖον (a speaking place), which is the word used by Philo. Clement seems to have misunderstood the LXX, not realising that λόγιον and περιστήθιον refer to the same object (Strom. 5.38.2). Gregory may have suffered from a similar confusion: In his list of vestments in 2.189 he refers both to “the breast-piece (προστήθιον) shining with varied rays from precious stones” and to “the rational (λόγιον) and the manifestation (δήλωσις) and the truth (ἀλήθεια) contemplated in both” (Malherbe and Ferguson’s translation amended). ‘Manifestation’ and ‘truth’ are the LXX’s translation of the Urim and the Thummim of Exodus 28:30. In 2.197 Gregory does not refer to either λόγιον or προστήθιον, but simply to an adornment (κόσμος). The LXX’s description of the breastpiece, and its attachment to the ephod, is complicated and difficult to visualise. Here in 2.197 Gregory simplifies it into two golden shields, one hanging from each shoulder-piece, to which is attached a rectangular golden ornament decorated with twelve stones arranged in four rows, no two of which are alike. (‘Golden ornament’ (χρυσότευκτον) gives the impression that he takes the breastpiece to be a metal breastplate, but a little further on (2.199) he refers to it as “the cloth of virtue” (τῷ πέπλῳ τῆς ἀρετῆς), showing that he is aware that it is made of woven material.) In the historia, he also talks of “intertwined cords plaited through one another in a netlike pattern hanging from the clasps on each side” (1.53), but they do not reappear here. The shields (ἀσπίδες 1.53; 2.197, 198, 199) presumably correspond to the ἀσπιδίσκαι (bosses, small shields) of the LXX (28:13, 14, 25), themselves an attempt to translate the מְשֶׁבָצָה (frames/settings? for the stones on the shoulders) of the MT (28:11, 13, 14). Gregory highlights these shields, seeing their meaning (διάνοια) as “the two-fold nature of our armor against the Adversary” (2.198). This further reference to the two-fold way of virtue is backed up by a quotation from 2 Corinthians 6:7:

We remain unwounded by the enemy’s darts, by being armed with the weapons of righteousness in the right hand and the left. (2.198)

The four-cornered shape is “a demonstration to you of steadfastness in the good. Such a shape is hard to move, since it is supported equally by the corners at each side” (2.199).

With the twelve stones, Gregory returns to the virtues of the patriarchs:

Scripture instructs us in this figure that he who repels the evil archer with these two shields will adorn his own soul with all the virtues of the patriarchs, for each stone shines with its own brilliance on the cloth of virtue. (2.199)

Gregory turns next to the “straps (τελαμῶνες) by which these adornments are tied to the arms”. They teach “that practical philosophy should be joined to contemplative
philosophy” (2.200), since the heart symbolises contemplation, while the arms symbolise works. Here is yet another variation on his theme of the twofold nature of virtue.

In his preliminary list of priestly garments, Gregory includes “the turban (ταυνία) for the head and the metal-leaf (πέταλον) upon it” (2.189). The word ταυνία is not in the LXX. The MT distinguishes between the מכנפת (RSV turban) worn by the high priest and the ממעות (RSV caps) worn by all the priests. The LXX sometimes translates מכנפת by μίτρα (e.g. LXX Ex 28:33, 29:6), but uses κίδαρις indiscriminately for both מכנפת and ממעות (LXX 28:4, 35, 36; 29:9). In his concluding section Gregory refers not to ταυνία but διάδημα - diadem. This could correspond to the נזר of the MT (Ex 29:6; 39:30; Lev 8:9), but there is no equivalent in the LXX, which translates both נזר and ציץ by πέταλον. Gregory says that the diadem “signifies the crown reserved for those who have lived well” (2.201). This alludes to the many NT verses which promise a crown to the righteous.105 He mentions the “inscription of ineffable letters in gold leaf”, but makes no comment upon it.

No footwear is prescribed in Exodus for the high priest. Gregory assumes therefore that he “wears no sandals” (2.201). He has already interpreted God’s command to Moses to take off his shoes:

Sandaled feet cannot ascend that height where the light of truth is seen, but the dead and earthly covering of skins, which was place around our nature at the beginning when we were found naked because of the disobedience to the divine will, must be removed from the feet of the soul. (Vit. Moys. 2.22)

The “covering of dead skins” (2.201), a reference to the clothing of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:21, corresponds to the “heavy and fleshy garment of life” (2.191). As Malherbe and Ferguson explain,

The “garments of skin” are not bodily existence per se, for man has a body in Paradise, but animality or biological existence. The garments include the passions, sexuality, and especially mortality, which are added to the human nature made in the image of God. (1978, 160 n.29)

They are to be cast off, as they constitute an “impediment to the ascent” (2.201).

105 1 Cor 9:25; 2 Tim 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:4; Rev 2:10, 3:11, 4:4.
All the Alexandrian writers assume that the details of the high priest’s vestments carry symbolic meanings, although they differ as to the framework within which those meanings are to be deciphered. Philo describes the high priest’s apparel as “a likeness and copy of the universe” (*Spec.* 1.84), and provides a detailed cosmological interpretation: the robe is an image of the air, its flowers represent the earth, its pomegranates water, its bells the harmonious alliance of the two; the two stones on the shoulders of the ephod represent the sun and moon, the twelve stones on the breastplate the signs of the zodiac; the four letters on the gold plate are related to geometrical categories and musical harmonies (*Mos.* 2.117-135; *Spec.* 1.84-97). In a discussion of the breastpiece (λογεῖον), which according to Exodus 28:16 was to be doubled over, he refers to the Stoic distinction between the indwelling (ἐνδιάθετος) and the uttered (προφορικός) logos, comparing it to the difference between “the incorporeal and archetypal ideas” and “the visible objects which are the copies and likenesses of those ideas” (*Mos.* 2.127). He says that the holy vestments were so designed that “in performing his holy office (the high priest) should have the whole universe as his fellow-ministrant” (*Spec.* 1.96). As in the case of the tabernacle, this cosmological interpretation is not unique, but can also be found in Josephus (*Ant.* 3.151-187), with some variation in the details. In a move not found in Josephus, Philo relates cosmology to anthropology. The high priest is to represent the universe not only by his clothes, but by his whole self. He is to “be in himself a little world, a microcosm” (*Mos.* 2.135). In some places, Philo designates him as the Logos:

We say, then, that the High Priest is not a man, but a Divine Word and immune from all unrighteousness whether intentional or unintentional. (*Fug.* 108; cf. *Migr.* 102)

He develops his anthropological allegorisation in less detail than his cosmological one, but in *Questions on Exodus* he provides anthropological interpretations of some individual elements of the garments. The shoulder pieces, for example “designate serious labours” (*QE* 2.108), and the twelve stones on the breastplate are related to the four virtues, each with three aspects (*QE* 2.112).

Clement’s allegorisation of the priestly garments is influenced by Philo. He says that their “multicolored symbols allude to celestial phenomena” (*Strom.* 5.32.2; van den Hoek 1988, 118). But he also imports ideas from other sources, some of which cannot now be identified. He talks, for example, of “the five stones and two carbuncles (ἀνθράκες)” (*Strom.* 5.37.1; van den Hoek 1988, 134) representing the seven planets,
which have no equivalent either in the LXX or in Philo. No other known writer numbers the bells suspended from the robe at three hundred and sixty. The main thrust of his interpretation is christological: the three hundred and sixty bells proclaim “the magnificent epiphany of the Saviour” (Strom. 5.37.4; van den Hoek 1988, 134); the gold cap “indicates the regal power of the Lord, since ‘the head of the church’ is the Saviour” (Strom. 5.37.5; van den Hoek 1988, 134); the breastplate (λόγιον) “signifies the prophecy which cries by the Word and proclaims the judgement that is to come” (Strom. 5.39.2; van den Hoek 1988, 140). Clement refers to different grades of Christian, saying that the stones “might be the various phases of salvation; some occupying the upper, some the lower parts of the entire saved body” (Strom. 5.7.3; van den Hoek 1988, 134). And he exploits Leviticus 16: The high priest, “the spiritual and perfect man”, puts off his consecrated robe, which “prophesied the ministry in the flesh by which (the Word) was made visible to the world directly”, “washes himself and puts on the other tunic, a holy-of-holies one, so to speak, which is to accompany him into the adytum” (Strom. 5.39.2-3; van den Hoek 1988, 140). On re-emerging he does the opposite. This putting on and off of clothes represents both the Lord “descending into the realm of sense” (Strom. 5.40.3; van den Hoek 1988, 141) and the ascent of the gnostic to the noetic realm wearing “the bright array of glory” (Strom. 5.40.1; van den Hoek 1988, 141). The interpretation of the high priest’s entry into the holy of holies is taken further in Excerpts from Theodotus 27. There he is said to remove the golden plate at the altar of incense, “indicating the laying aside of the body which has become pure like the golden plate” (27.2; Casey 1934, 61). Kovacs argues that “this seems to refer not to the physical body but to a further purification of the soul by shedding everything that is not essential to it” (1997, 435). Divested of its inferior parts, the soul of the high priest “passes into the spiritual realm and becomes now truly rational and high priestly” (27.3; Casey 1934, 61). This involves “being controlled directly by the Lord and becoming, as it were, his body” (27.6; Casey 1934, 63). The golden plate is also associated with “the pursuit of knowledge (γνῶσις)” (27.6; Casey 1934, 63). Kovacs, who argues that Excerpts from Theodotus 27 stems from Clement himself (1997, 433), puts this together with Miscellanies 5.32-40:

The Gnostic high priest, who has earlier exchanged the garment of faith for the bright array of γνῶσις (Str. V 6, 40.1), now removes the vestment of γνῶσις and enters into direct contemplation of God. (1997, 437)

Origen tackles the priestly garments in Homilies on Exodus (with reference to Exodus 28) and Homilies on Leviticus (with reference to Leviticus 8:7-9). He departs from both the predominantly cosmological interpretation of Philo and the predominantly
christological interpretation of Clement, instead allegorising the garments in terms of virtues. He uses Psalm 131:9 and Colossians 3:12 to designate the priestly clothing as garments of justice and mercy (Hom. Exod. 9.3). And whereas for Philo the high priest represents the Logos, and for Clement an elite category of Christian, Origen argues that, at least in theory, anyone can wear these clothes: “that part which is the most precious in man can hold the office of high priest” (Hom. Exod. 9.4; Heine 1982, 343); “you too can function as a high priest before God within the temple of your spirit if you would prepare your garments with zeal and vigilance” (Hom. Lev. 6.5.2; Barkley 1990, 125). His interpretation of the vestments is not the same in the two series of sermons, partly because he notices details in the biblical texts, such as that Lev 8:7-8 (LXX) talks about girding Aaron twice.\footnote{This arises because the MT has two different ‘girdles’: the אבנט (Ex 28:4, 39; Lev 8:7) and the חשב אפדתו (Ex 28:8; Lev 8:7). Haran (1978, 167 n.39) interprets חשב as the upper part of the ephod.} Lev 8:7 also mentions both the tunic (χιτών) and the robe (ὑποδύτης), which is why in Homilies on Leviticus he talks of two tunics: “one of the ministry of the flesh; another of spiritual understanding” (6.3.5; Barkley 1990, 122). The interpretations do not contradict each other, but, as far as can be ascertained from the Latin translations, the wording is different. In Homilies on Exodus the breastpiece “represents the rational understanding which is in us” (13.7; Heine 1982, 385), in Homilies on Leviticus it “is a sign of wisdom because wisdom is founded on reason” (6.4.2; Barkley 1990, 123). ‘Truth’ (ueritas) and ‘manifestation’/‘communication’ (manifestatio) – the Urim and the Thummim – are placed on it either so that we “perceive the message of the Gospel which, in its fourfold order, sets out to us the truth of the faith and the manifestation of the Trinity” (Hom. Exod. 9.4; Heine 1982, 343), or because the high priest must communicate what he knows and never depart from the truth (Hom. Lev. 6.4.3; Barkley 1990, 123). The robe (whose length signifies that the whole person should be clothed with chastity) and the bells (“that you might never keep silent about the last times”) feature in Homilies on Exodus (9.4; Heine 1982, 343), but not in Homilies on Leviticus. Homilies on Leviticus, on the other hand, reflects on the differences in clothing between “minor priests and major priests” (6.6.1; Barkley 1990, 126), arguing that not everyone reaches the required standards:

For anyone can perform the religious ministry, but few there are who are adorned with morals, instructed in doctrine, educated in wisdom, very well adapted to communicate the truth of things and who expound the wisdom of the faith, not omitting the ornament of understandings and the splendor of assertions which is represented by the ornament “of gold plate” placed on his head. (6.6.1; Barkley 1990, 126)
Geljon argues that Gregory’s reference to the robe representing the air adds to the evidence that he had read Philo’s *Moses* (2002, 138-140). There are a few other details in Gregory’s interpretation, not mentioned by Geljon, which have a Philonic ring to them. He connects the twelve stones of the breastpiece with the virtues of the patriarchs (2.199), as does Philo (*QE* 2.114). Philo does so, however, as part of a complex interpretation which includes the cosmological understanding of the twelve stones as the twelve signs of the zodiac, with the patriarchs becoming constellations. Gregory says that the four-cornered shape of the breastpiece should be “a demonstration to you of steadfastness in the good” (2.199). A similar interpretation appears in Philo:

> The master did well also in assigning a four-square shape to the reason-seat (τῷ λογείῳ), thereby shewing in a figure that the rational principle (λόγος), both in nature and in man, must everywhere stand firm and never be shaken in any respect at all. (*Mos.* 2.128)

Shoulders consistently represent work in the Alexandrian tradition, and so therefore do both the ephod (אפוד; ἐπωμίς) and the shoulder-pieces (כתפת; ἐπωμίδες). Although Gregory transfers work from shoulders to arms, and then associates the heart with philosophy, his two-fold interpretation of the ‘straps’ echoes Philo’s comment on the two shoulder pieces:

> There are two form of labour: one is the desire of pleasing God, and of piety; the other is being beneficent to men, which is called kindness and love of man. (*QE* 2.108)

Gregory’s overall purpose, however, is very different to Philo’s. He is not interested in cosmological parallels. Neither is he interested in the kind of christological interpretation given by Clement, who connects the λόγος to the Logos. Gregory’s avoidance of λόγος in his detailed interpretation may be a deliberate move, so as not to become drawn into christological subordinationism. His interpretative framework is much closer to Origen’s. His rhetorical question: “What sort of material garments would be called rational, doctrine or truth?” (2.190) resembles Origen’s remark:

> If anyone ever saw, if anyone ever heard of the vestments called “communication and truth,” let them tell us who the women are who wove these, or in what shop they were woven. But if you want to hear the truth, it is wisdom that makes garments like this. (*Hom. Lev.* 6.4.3; Barkley 1990, 124)

He does not, however, borrow Origen’s wording (always allowing that Origen is only available in translation). Both interpret the garments in terms of virtue, but the details differ, as illustrated by the colours of the ephod. Origen interprets blue/violet (ὑάκινθος) as the hope of the kingdom of heaven, purple (πορφύρα) as the splendour of love, scarlet

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107 See Philo *Mos.* 2.130, *QE* 2.108; Clement *Strom.* 5.38.2; Origen *Hom. Lev.* 6.3.6.
(κόκκος) as the glory of suffering, and linen (βύσσος) as virginity (Hom. Exod. 9.3; Heine 1982, 340). There is no overlap with Gregory’s list in 2.196. Origen’s interpretation, with its inclusion of suffering and virginity, seems more ‘ascetic’ than Gregory’s. Did Gregory take over the general idea from Origen, but then develop his own variations? Gregory does not use the garments to develop a list of Christian virtues. He never specifies exactly what he means by virtue; and the allegorisation of the four colours is the only place where he mentions individual virtues. Instead, we learn that virtue should not be cut short; that the philosophical life, although outwardly austere and unpleasant, is yet full of good hopes when it ripens; that we should discover something extra by our own endeavour; that our lives are adorned by the earlier examples of the patriarchs; and so on. The ‘refrain’ is that virtue should be lived in a two-fold way. Despite the wealth of detail, the message of the clothing is simple: “that practical philosophy should be joined to contemplative philosophy” (2.200). Gregory is not arguing for particular virtues, but that Christian life is to be measured by the way in which it is lived. There are points of contact with the interpretation of his predecessors; but, by and large, his exegesis is original, both in its details, and its overall purpose.

4.10.3 Theological context

In Heine’s view, not only is Gregory’s theological insistence on the incomprehensibility of God’s essence aimed at Eunomius, but so too is his emphasis on virtue: “Gregory seems to have had Eunomius’ disregard for asceticism in mind in his interpretation of the color of the priestly robe” (1975, 184). He sets Gregory’s interpretation of the blue robe alongside an extract from Against Eunomius in which Gregory compares his brother Basil – “who decrees alike for himself and for his circle sobriety and decency and absolute purity of soul and body through strictest chastity” – with Eunomius – “who forbids us to make difficulties for the character which is advancing as it chooses through the appetites of the body” (Eun. 1.99; GNO 1.55-6; Hall 1988, 50). Heine comments,

The two key elements in the De vita Moysis passage can be found in Gregory's depiction of Basil and Eunomius. The De vita Moysis passage implies that negligence in respect to the flesh can harm the soul, and, therefore, one must guard against this by purity of living. In the Contra Eunomium passage Gregory represents Basil as a man who was concerned about purity of soul and body. Eunomius, however, plays this down saying that the soul cannot be harmed by indulging the flesh. Here, again, the teaching of the De vita Moysis opposes a view that Eunomius had championed and which Gregory had attacked. (1975, 185)

However, the imagery used in Life of Moses is widespread in Gregory’s work, and cannot be pinned down simply to his conflict with Eunomius. And it is striking how little
emphasis there is on asceticism in his interpretation of the priestly garments. He talks about ‘virtue’ without specifying which particular virtues he has in mind. The philosophical life is “outwardly austere and unpleasant”, and he talks about Paul being “in hunger, thirst, and naked”; but his interpretation of the four colours is milder than Origen’s – no “glory of suffering”. The references to “mortification of the sinful flesh”, “the ascetic way of life”, “self-control”, and “virginity” (2.187) come earlier, in the description of the earthly tabernacle. The exegesis of the priestly vestments is a series of variations on the theme of the twofold nature of virtue. He returns to this again and again: the bells and pomegranates, the two shields, the breastplate joined to the arms. The interest of his interpretation is not in the details, but in the overall picture. Gregory explains in To Call Oneself a Christian that heaven is not “some remote habitation of God (κεχωρισμένον ἐνδιαίτημα θεοῦ)” (GNO 8,1.138.25; Callahan 1967, 87), but a result of human choice: “a heavenly sojourn is easy for anyone who wants it even on earth ... by our thinking heavenly thoughts and depositing in the treasury there a wealth of virtue” (GNO 8,1.140.11-14; Callahan 1967, 88). As Sterk says,

For Gregory virtue is not a step on the pathway to perfection, a stage that must be surpassed and superceded by the mystical or unitive experience. Virtuous action must flow from contemplation and knowledge of God for it is part of a continuous process of perfection. (1998, 248 n.101)

Nowhere does Gregory mention that these are garments of the high priest, and only twice (2.189, 191) does he link them to priests. The impression given is that they are garments anyone can aspire to wear. What he is most keen to stress is that virtue and doctrine are intertwined. He may have been fighting on two fronts: against people like Eunomius who, in Gregory’s mind, emphasised doctrine and neglected virtue; and against radical ascetics, who claimed authority for themselves from their lifestyle, bypassing the structures of the church (cf. 4.7.3). Chadwick comments on Basil’s emphasis on restraint, saying that he prescribed severe penalties “for monks who set themselves austere fasts without leave” (1967, 179). Elsewhere in Life of Moses Gregory says that “virtue is discerned in the mean” (2.288). In his interpretation of the priestly garments he stresses not heroic individual feats of asceticism, but that virtue cannot be disengaged from orthodoxy, and therefore from the church.

4.10.4 Heavenly ascent context

Garments feature prominently in heavenly ascent texts. There are four categories of being who wear distinctive clothing: transformed ascending heroes, such as Enoch or Levi; the righteous dead; angels; and God, or, perhaps more accurately, the glory of God.
They do not each have distinct clothing: there are correlations between their garments. Depicting angels, and even God, as wearing clothes, is clearly anthropomorphic. Viewed from another angle, however, these garments are metaphors for the absence of flesh and blood in heaven. There is interplay between angelic dress and the divine glory, with neither understood as earthly.

Heavenly clothing is sometimes white, sometimes multicoloured. Each of these traditions may relate to priestly vestments. Mysterious angelic figures wearing plain linen (טֵש) appear in Ezekiel (9:2-3, 11; 10:2, 6, 7) and Daniel (10:5; 12:6-7). The garments of the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7:9 and of the Great Glory in *I Enoch* 14:20 are compared to white snow. Himmelfarb suggests that the plain linen garment worn by the high priest for his yearly entry into the Holy of Holies (Lev 16:14), “the earthly counterpart of the spot where God sits enthroned in the heavenly temple”, may have contributed to the whiteness of the divine robe in *I Enoch* 14 (1993a, 18). Following on from these early texts, there emerged a more generalised picture of white clothing in heaven. The elders in Revelation (4:4) and the ‘men’ in *Testament of Levi* (8:2) wear white, as do the righteous dead in Revelation (3:5; 6:11; 7:9, 13-4). This whiteness was also associated with luminosity. The garment of the Great Glory in *I Enoch* 14:20 shines more brightly than the sun. Halperin sees here the influence of the phrase “you wrap yourself with light as with a garment” from Psalm 104:2 (1988b, 83). Alexander points out that “the description of the raiment baffles visualization; it is like the glare of the sun’s orb, or of a snow-field, both of which overwhelm and ‘whiteout’ human vision” (2006b, 358 n.15). The luminous quality of other heavenly garments is symbolic of participation in this divine glory.

One source for multicoloured clothing in heaven is the rainbow brightness surrounding the figure on the mobile throne in Ezekiel 1:26-28. A rainbow appears, for example, in the description of the allusive figure on the throne in Revelation 4:2-4; and the description of the angelic spirits who surround and move with the *merkavah* in song

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108 “His raiment was like the appearance of the sun and whiter than much snow (ὡς ἐλθός ἡλίου λαμπρότερον καὶ λευκότερον πάσης χιόνος, cf. 4QEn’ 1 vii 2: [טש]וּר נֵב[ר]ן )’” (Black 1970, 29; Milik 1976, 199; Nickelsburg 2001, 257).

109 The Ancient of Days in Daniel 7 also has hair like pure wool, which is presumably white. That imagery is widely attributed to Canaanite influence; see Emerton (1958). There is, however, no mention of hair in *I Enoch* 14.

110 The syntax of the phrase is awkward. See Nickelsburg (2001, 258 n.20a).
12 of *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* draws on Ezekiel 1:27-28 (note כמראי אש; חלם; נוגה):

5 its glorious [h]ubs.  Like the appearance of fire (כמRAINT אש) (are) the spirits of holiest holiness round about, the appearance of streams of fire like electrum (חשׁב).  And (there are) works of

6 [ra]diance with glorious mingled colors (ממשי תודנה זבעד), wondrously hued (מצועי פלא), brightly blended (ممאלת תוד), spirits of living [g]odlike beings moving continuously with the glory of [the] wondrous chariots.

(4Q405 20-22 ii 10-11; Charlesworth & Newsom 1999, 182-3)

This language also resembles the evocation of the angelic priestly garments in song 13, which in turn uses vocabulary from Exodus 28:111

18 their holy places.  In their wondrous station (are) spirits of mingled colors like woven work (ממשי תוד), engraved (פתוחי) with images of splendor.

19 In the midst of the glorious appearance of scarlet (שׁני) are (garments) dyed with a light of a spirit of holiest holiness, those who stand fast (in) their holy station before

20 (the) [k]ing, spirits of [brightly] dyed (צבעי) stuffs in the midst of the appearance of whiteness.  And the likeness of (the) glorious spirit (is) like fine gold work, shedding

21 [ligh]t.  And all their decoration is brightly blended (ممאלת תוד), an artistry like woven works (חשׁב קמועתי אורה).  These are the chiefs of those wondrously arrayed for service,

(4Q405 23 ii 7-10; Charlesworth & Newsom 1999, 186-9)

In the much later 3 *Enoch*, the influence of both high priestly apparel and Ezekiel's rainbow brightness can be seen in the description of Metatron’s clothing:

The Holy One, blessed be he, fashioned for me a majestic robe (לבוש של גיאה), in which all kinds of luminaries were set, and he clothed me in it.  He fashioned for me a glorious cloak (מעיל כבוד) in which brightness, brilliance, splendor, and luster of every kind were fixed, and he wrapped me in it.  He fashioned for me a kingly crown in which 49 refulgent stones were placed, each like the sun’s orb, and its brilliance shone into the four quarters of the heaven of ‘Arabot, into the seven heavens, and into the four quarters of the world.  (12:1-5; Alexander 1983, 265)

*Testament of Levi* contains an even clearer reference to priestly vestments: during his second ascent Levi undergoes an investiture ceremony whose seven items are clearly intended to be high priestly, even if the terminology is slightly confused:

And I saw seven men in white clothing, saying to me:

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111 Cf. (Ex 28:39; 39:29); (Ex 28:32; 39:22, 27); (Ex 28:8); (Ex 28:11); (Ex 25:4).
Arise, put on the robe of the priesthood (τὴν στολὴν τῆς ἱερατείας) and the crown of righteousness (τὸν στέφανον τῆς δικαιοσύνης) and the breastplate of understanding (τὸ λόγιον τῆς συνέσεως) and the garment of truth (τὸν ποδήρη τῆς ἀληθείας) and the plate of faith (τὸ πέταλον τῆς πίστεως) and the turban of (giving) a sign (τὴν μίτραν τοῦ σημείου) and the ephod of prophecy (τὸ ἐφόδι τῆς προφητείας).

(8:2-10; Hollander & de Jonge 1985, 149)

This is the only heavenly ascent text which, like Gregory, makes the priestly garments symbolic of virtue. There is no correspondence, however, between the symbolism given to each item in Testament of Levi and Gregory’s allegorisation. Testament of Levi’s interpretation could well be the work of Christian editors, influenced by Ephesians 6:13-17, which allegorises armour. Quotations from the New Testament play an important role in Gregory’s interpretation of the garments, but he does not allude to Ephesians 6. Despite the superficial resemblance, therefore, there is no link between the texts. In Testament of Levi the high priestly vestments are handed over in heaven, to one privileged individual, in order to validate his earthly ministry; in Life of Moses they represent the virtuous behaviour of all believers.

The elaborate multicoloured clothing of Exodus 28, including stones engraved with the name of the twelve tribes, encapsulates the high priest’s representative function. Later interpretations, such as those contained in Wisdom of Solomon, Philo and Josephus, declare the priestly clothing to be “a likeness and copy of the universe” (Spec. 1.84; cf. Wis 18:24; Ant. 3.180). A vestige of this tradition survives in the Hekhalot literature, which refers to a divine garment (using the term πᾶλη – a shirtlike robe) with a cosmic function:

Constellations and stars and zodiacal signs
Flow and issue forth from the garment of Him
Who is crowned and (shrouded) in it ...
(Hekhalot Rabbati §105; Scholem 1960, 61)

The plain garments of Leviticus 16, by contrast, strip the high priest of his representative function, and bring him ‘naked’ before God.112 So too in heaven, the multicoloured clothing seems to be given to those with ritual or representative functions, those closest to the glory of God. Messenger angels and the multitude of righteous dead wear white.

Human beings who make it to heaven after death shed their material bodies and, like angels, wear ‘clothes’ which partake of the divine glory. In Ascension of Isaiah,

112 This is explored by Rooke (2007).
Isaiah sees “the righteous from the time of Adam onwards ... stripped of (their) robes of the flesh; and ... in their robes of above, and they (are) like the angels who stand there in great glory” (9:7-9; Knibb 1985, 170). There is an angel in 3 Enoch named 'Azbogah who “girds men with garments of life (בגדי חיים) and in time to come he will wrap the righteous and pious of the world in robes of life (מעיל חיים), so that clad in them they may enjoy eternal life” (18:22; §27; Alexander 1983, 274). As Alexander comments, “The ‘garments of life’ and the ‘robes of life’ are the immortal bodies which the righteous receive in heaven” (1983, 274 n.12). Privileged individuals who ascend before death also have to be transformed. As Alexander writes,

Bodily ascent to the alien environment of heaven has huge theological implications, and demands the transformation of flesh and blood into a more spiritual substance. The material body in its present terrestrial form cannot endure the fiery celestial regions. (2006a, 77)

Not all ascent texts describe a bodily ascent: in 1 Enoch Enoch sees heaven in a vision (14:1, 2, 4, 8); and Alexander argues that in 3 Enoch Ishmael “seems to make a soul excursion into heaven” (2011, 181). But 2 Enoch reports that Enoch was taken bodily into heaven by two huge men (1:4-9), hence the need for a transformation and change of clothing:

The LORD said to Michael, “Take Enoch, and extract (him) from the earthly clothing. And anoint him with the delightful oil, and put (him) into the clothes of glory.” And Michael extracted me from my clothes. He anointed me with the delightful oil … And I gazed at all of myself, and I had become like one of the glorious ones, and there was no observable difference. (22:8-10; Andersen 1983, 139)

For his descent back to earth his face has to be chilled, otherwise “no human being would be able to look at (it)” (37; Andersen 1983, 160). Isaiah’s transformation seems to take place gradually: “for the glory of my face was being transformed as I went up from heaven to heaven” (Ascen. Isa. 7:25; Knibb 1985, 167). When he arrives at the seventh heaven, a voice asks, “How far is he who dwells among aliens to go up?”; but another voice, that of Christ, answers, “The holy Isaiah is permitted to come up here, for his robe is here” (Ascen. Isa. 9:1-2; Knibb 1985, 169). When Enoch is transformed into Metatron, he is first enlarged until he matches the world in length and breadth (3 Enoch 9), and then, as he tells Ishmael:

My flesh turned to flame, my sinews to blazing fire, my bones to juniper coals, my eyelashes to lightning flashes, my eyeballs to fiery torches, the hairs of my head to hot flames, all my limbs to wings of burning fire, and the substance of my body to blazing fire. (3 Enoch 15:1; §19; Alexander 1983, 267)

This is reminiscent of the fate of any human being who dares look at the divine פלאה:

Of no creature are the eyes able to behold it ...
And as for him who does behold it, or sees or glimpses it, Whirling gyrations grip the balls of his eyes. And the balls of his eyes cast out and send forth torches of fire And these enkindle him and these burn him.  

(Hezhalot Rabbati §102; Scholem 1960, 60)

As Scholem points out, This is not … a description of dangers confronting the mystic, but of a mystical transfiguration taking place within him. What is a permanent transfiguration in the case of Enoch, however, is only a temporary experience in the case of the Merkabah mystic. (1960, 60).

And as Morray-Jones adds, the process “is terrifyingly dangerous, even fatal, should he prove unworthy” (1992, 25). Morray-Jones has designated this process ‘transformational mysticism’ (1992), arguing that in a wide range of texts “the vision of the Glory entailed the transformation of the visionary into an angelic likeness of that divine image” (Rowland & Morray-Jones 2009, 334).

4.10.5 Conclusions

What light does the comparison with heavenly ascent texts shed on Gregory’s work? In equating the high priestly robe with an airy tunic – a heavenly garment – he is tapping into a widespread tradition. Angelic clothing in ascent texts also mirrors priestly vestments. Like the authors of those texts, Gregory believes that ascending to heaven involves shedding the heavy garments of earthly existence and donning new ‘clothing’, similar to angelic garb. The heavenly ascent texts, with their ‘transformational mysticism’, hold out the hope that for a few exceptional individuals it is possible to undergo the necessary transformation and ascend to heaven before death. Gregory also states that it is possible to wear an airy tunic in this life – his sister Macrina provides a contemporary example. There are, however, also clear differences. On a minor point, Gregory’s interpretation of the robe starts out from Philo’s allegorisation of its blue colour. Ascent texts pick up either on the white of the priestly garments in Leviticus 16, or on the multicoloured nature of the ephod and breastpiece in Exodus 28. More important is Gregory’s emphasis on virtue. Heavenly ascent texts assume that anyone ascending to heaven before death must be righteous. Virtue is a precondition. Gregory makes it the journey: the process of donning priestly garments is the process of becoming virtuous. The garments he allegorises belonged to the high priest – the representative of Israel and the one person allowed into the holy of holies. But he calls them “vestments of the priesthood (τὸν στολισμὸν τῆς ἱερωσύνης)” (2.189), never mentioning the high priest. Neither does he refer to Leviticus 16. In 2.188 he has said that the holy of holies
is inaccessible, representing the incomprehensible essence of God. The one high priest has been replaced by the company of the virtuous. These cannot grasp the essence of God with the mind, but, by living a modest, pure life, participate in the divine glory, replacing their earthly bodies with heavenly robes. Heaven is not a place, not “some remote habitation of God” (Prof.; GNO 8.1.138.25; Callahan 1967, 87), but a result of how we live here and now. According to Williams,

Gregory determinedly revises the notion (of participation in the divine) so as to direct attention to participation not in what God is, but in what he does. (1979, 53) As Gregory himself says, “whoever pursues true virtue participates in nothing other than God” (Vit. Moys. 1.7). In his interpretation of the priestly robe, therefore, he agrees with the heavenly ascent texts that the ultimate goal is to become like an angel, with the angelic state symbolised by a garment; but in his ‘transformational mysticism’, the transformation involved is an ethical one.
5 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 The value of heuristic comparison

This thesis set out to explore Gregory of Nyssa’s tabernacle imagery. One of the methodologies it has employed, and the most controversial, is heuristic comparison with a range of heavenly ascent texts from the Hellenistic and Late Antique worlds. Has the exercise been worthwhile? Has it yielded results? In other words, have we gained insights into Gregory’s tabernacle interpretation? The heavenly ascent texts used have been of very different genres to Life of Moses, including pseudepigraphic apocalypses, liturgical material, and rabbinic aggadah. They often employ vivid imagery, rather than philosophical argumentation. And yet it has been shown that they wrestle with some of the same issues as faced by Gregory. The same questions recur, albeit posed in different ways:

- How can God be described or talked about when God cannot be seen or even named?
- If ‘heaven’ is different to ‘earth’, can anyone cross from one to the other? And if so, how?
- Who is allowed access to holy mysteries?

Different texts come to different solutions. The inaccessibility of God can be conveyed with imagery either of blinding light/glory or of impenetrable darkness. The fact that no name is capable of encompassing the essence of God may be set out with rational arguments, or it can transpire through the longer and longer lists of gobbledygook which never fulfill their promise. The uninitiated can be kept away from holy mysteries either by statements of prohibition, or with graphic descriptions of supernatural punishments. Sometimes different texts arrive at similar solutions quite independently. Both Gregory and the rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud quote Psalm 18:12, with its talk of darkness surrounding God. Both Life of Moses and Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice describe a heavenly tabernacle/temple made up of angelic powers; yet Gregory comes to that conclusion thanks to Colossians 1:16, whereas Sabbath Songs draws on Ezekiel 1.

Gregory’s ideas are usually discussed in relation either to the theology of other church fathers, or to Platonist philosophy. They are not related to ‘fringe texts’ such as ascent apocalypses. Yet works such as 1 Enoch, Testament of Levi and Ascension of Isaiah, even if they preserve some Jewish traditions, were edited, copied and transmitted by Christians. 1 Enoch is quoted as a work of prophecy by Jude, Barnabas, and Clement.
of Alexandria (VanderKam 1996, 35-47). Origen refers to it in four of his writings, cautioning that “the books entitled Enoch are not generally held to be divine by the churches” (Cels. 5.54; VanderKam 1996, 59). Therefore Gregory may well have been familiar with some of its contents, even if, like Jerome, he gave it little credence. He certainly seems familiar with the tradition in Ascension of Isaiah about Christ taking on the form of the angels in each of the heavens through which he descends. It has not been necessary for the purposes of this study to prove that Gregory was influenced by any particular text; but it is important to point out that ideas about heavenly ascent were circulating in fourth century Christian circles. Although the comparison undertaken has been heuristic, the possibility of interaction between ‘orthodox’ theologians and ascent traditions should not be ruled out. However, it is comparisons with texts where there is no possibility of influence – Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, the Babylonian Talmud, and the Hekhalot literature – which have proved particularly striking. Gregory will not have read any of the Dead Sea Scrolls, nor had any contact with the rabbinic world in Babylonia. But the exploration of similarities and differences between these texts and Life of Moses has sharpened the delination of Gregory’s use of tabernacle imagery.

5.1.1 Life of Moses and Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice

Both Life of Moses and Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice evoke a celestial tabernacle/temple composed of heavenly powers. They both recognise that God’s heavenly sanctuary is not a material building, but a ‘spiritual’ one. Sabbath Songs employs language from Ezekiel – cherubim, ‘ophannim, hashmal – and seems to be extending Ezekiel’s depiction of God’s throne as a living, moving angelic structure to the whole heavenly temple. The pillars and corners join in the praise. The elusive language may even be suggesting that it is the praise itself which creates the temple – “a structure composed of living sound” (Morray-Jones 2006, 167). Gregory, on the other hand, starts with the heavenly tabernacle as a type of Christ. He then makes use of Colossians 1:16, which talks of heavenly powers being created in Christ. He draws on the Alexandrian tradition of allegorising the tabernacle furniture, and equates the different elements of the tabernacle with the features of angelic beings. He goes on to draw on the Pauline tradition of the church as the body of Christ to allegorise the earthly tabernacle in terms of the members of the church. Thus he creates a parallelism between an earthly body of Christ and a heavenly angelic one. At Qumran too, “the community aimed at creating on earth a replica of the heavenly world” (Dimant 1996, 101). This surfaces not in Sabbath

113 See Adler (1996, 23).
Songs, but in some of the other Dead Sea Scrolls, such as 4Q174 (4QFlorilegium), 1QS (Community Rule), 1QH (Thanksgiving Hymns) and CD (Damascus Document). However, this parallelism is exploited in very different ways in the two contexts. Whether or not they boycotted the Jerusalem temple completely, the Qumran community was at odds with its leadership. They therefore turned instead to the worship of the heavenly temple. In Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice human beings observe, and perhaps thereby feel themselves to be participating in, angelic worship. This was presumably seen as a foretaste of what earthly liturgy would be like once the Jerusalem temple was returned to its true vocation. Gregory, on the other hand, is not criticising contemporary earthly worship, but validating it. He is discouraging attempts to ascend to heaven, by pointing out that all that is needful can be found in the earthly tabernacle, the church. The reunion with angelic worship will only happen at the end of time, as he describes in On the Inscriptions of the Psalms, On the Soul and Resurrection and On the Nativity of Christ.

5.1.2 Life of Moses and b. Hagigah

Gregory’s allegorical interpretation of Moses’ vision of the tabernacle not made with hands and the Bavli’s discussions about the exegesis of the first chapter of Ezekiel both draw on pre-existing heavenly ascent traditions. They embrace and celebrate those traditions, but then ring them around with taboos. The epicentre of holiness and power, whether conceptualised as the holy of holies of the heavenly tabernacle or as the merkavah, is not open to all. God’s privacy must be safeguarded; and religious authority channelled through appropriate people. Both texts independently turn to the biblical imagery of darkness to symbolise God’s inaccessibility and incomprehensibility to the human mind. But they also present an elite, high priests as it were, who can venture into the darkness. Moses ascends Mount Sinai and sees a vision of the heavenly tabernacle. A few in the church – monks, priests, bishops? – are called to follow him. Most people, however, are to remain at the foot of the mountain. Hoi polloi are not allowed in the holy of holies: they are to worship in the outer room of the earthly tabernacle. Similarly, heroic rabbis of old performed an exegesis of Ezekiel 1 which dissolved the boundaries between heaven and earth. Aqiva safely negotiated all the dangers and was able to enter pardes. Contemporary rabbis draw from their authority; but everyone else is to steer clear of such dangerous mysteries. The righteous of Israel are to praise God by day and study Torah by night, not ascend to heaven, or speculate on matters too high for them. Gregory is able to exploit the imagery of the earthly tabernacle: Since it is an exact copy
of the heavenly one, there is no need to aspire to heaven. Only at the end of time will the curtain in front of the holy of holies be destroyed, and will humans and angels worship together. The Bavli makes Israel’s worship superior to that of the angels, so that, once again, there is no need to aspire to heaven.

These similarities exist not because of influence, but because in Late Antiquity both Jewish and Christian religious authorities had to deal with the challenge of heavenly ascent texts. Traditions which interpreted biblical texts such as Exodus 25 and Ezekiel 1 in terms of heavenly ascent were too widespread to be ignored, and may indeed have been taken for granted by Gregory and the rabbis. But this apocalyptic legacy opened the door to the possibility of fresh revelation, and to bids for leadership based on knowledge of heavenly secrets. Bishops and rabbis both had a vested interest in the institutionalisation of authority, and needed to keep a lid on prophetic, charismatic outbursts. Their leadership was based on their skill in interpreting their respective religious traditions: In the dispute over the oven of ‘Aknai (b. Baba Meşi’a 59a-59b), neither a series of miracles nor the heavenly voice (bat qol) were allowed to prevail over a majority rabbinic opinion; Gregory and his fellow Cappadocians were engaged in long-running disputes over the application of philosophical terms to the doctrine of the Trinity. In both cases, exegesis had a political agenda. They could not ignore heavenly ascent traditions, and therefore commandeered them, claiming their authority for themselves. Religious authority figures are represented as making the ascent, and thus as having access to the fountainhead of religious power. Everyone else is firmly told that the holy of holies is out of bounds to hoi polloi.

5.1.3 *Life of Moses* and the Hekhalot literature

*Life of Moses* and the Hekhalot literature seem poles apart. One is a carefully argued allegorical exegesis of Exodus by a known author; the other is a collection of fluid texts, whose history is debateable, containing a potpourri of hymns, incantations, fragments of narrative, and lists of names resembling gibberish. However, it has been shown that, despite the differences of genre, they address some of the same questions, the most important being ‘what can human beings know of God?’ Gregory argues that God’s essence cannot be known, and sees both darkness and the holy of holies as symbols of that incomprehensibility. The Hekhalot texts stress the dangers of trying to see God, from terrifying guardian angels to the consuming fire emanating from the divine garment. This garment seems to be a protective measure against even greater danger.
Despite the risks, the texts imply that a vision of the King in his beauty, on his throne of glory, is possible. However, as Schäfer points out, they promise more than they deliver, saying “almost nothing at all about what the mystic actually sees when he finally arrives at the goal of his wishes” (1988a, 285). A similar scenario occurs with regard to names. Gregory argues that Moses’ vision reveals a new name for God – ‘tabernacle’ – but he is clear about the limitations of that name. The Hekhalot texts promise that the names they reveal will accomplish wonders, from giving access to the heavenly chambers to summoning the Prince of Torah; but the longer the lists of names become, the more unconvincing the promises seem. Unwittingly, these texts illustrate Gregory’s argument that no name gives access to the divine essence. Schäfer argues that the goal of the yored merkavah is not to see the divine throne, but to participate in the heavenly liturgy as a representative of Israel, thereby confirming “for the earthly congregation that it stands in direct contact with God in its synagogue liturgy” (1988a, 288). Gregory sees Moses’ vision as validating earthly worship: it confirms that the church’s liturgy is in parallel with the angelic one. In the Hekhalot texts, the yored merkavah undergoes a fiery transformation. Gregory too draws on the theme of transformation, but with quite a different purpose. He emphasises that a believer’s transformation takes place not by ascending to heaven, but by embracing a life of virtue.

5.1.4 *Life of Moses* and scholarship on Jewish mysticism

This study has not only involved examining heavenly ascent texts; it has also drawn on the scholarship engendered by them. The discussions surrounding heavenly ascent texts have helped to frame the questions to be asked of *Life of Moses*. As pointed out in the introduction (1.3.2), there are parallels between the ‘mysticism’ versus ‘theology’ debates in Gregorian scholarship, and the ‘experience’ versus ‘exegesis’ divide among scholars of both pseudepigraphic ascent apocalypses and Jewish mysticism. More will be said on this topic in 5.3. Two concepts developed by scholars of Jewish mysticism have proved particularly useful in analysing Gregory’s tabernacle imagery. The first is the distinction between unio mystica and unio liturgica. Schäfer argues that only in Philo, with his division between body and soul, and individualistic agenda, is there anything which could be described as unio mystica (Schäfer 2009, 352-3). In the ascent apocalypses, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, and the Hekhalot literature, there is but a unio liturgica – a liturgical communion of the mystic with the angels (Schäfer 2009, 341, 349). He insists that the rabbis of the Bavli, by contrast, were preoccupied with exegesis, not with mystical experiences of any kind. *B. Hagigah* 12b
does, however, mention liturgy – both that of the angels and that of Israel. These are to occur in parallel, in separate spheres and at separate times. The Bavli even indicates that Israel’s worship is superior to that of the angels. This analysis helps to clarify Gregory’s mysticism: Parts of Moses’ vision symbolise angelic liturgy, but with no suggestion that Moses joins in; and the rest of the people are expected to worship in the earthly tabernacle. This is much more like the Bavli than heavenly ascent texts proper. In other works Gregory does talk of a unio liturgica, but one which is to occur at the end of time, when humanity will be reunited with the angels. The other concept which has proved useful is that of ‘transformational mysticism’. Morray-Jones argues that, in a wide range of heavenly ascent texts, “the vision of the Glory entailed the transformation of the visionary into an angelic likeness of that Divine Image” (Rowland & Morray-Jones 2009, 334). Wolfson suggests that this angelification, found in Jewish sources, may provide an alternative model to the typology of mystical experience rooted in neoplatonic ontology and epistemology, in which “contemplation of God results in a form of union whereby the soul separates from the body and returns to its ontological source in the One” (1994a, 186). Wolfson seems to equate becoming angelic with becoming divine (1994a, 187), whereas Schäfer cautions that “the transformed seer, in his angelicized state, at no time enters into a union with his God” (Schäfer 2009, 337). As shown in 4.10.4, this transformation is often described in terms of a change of clothing. And it was argued there that Gregory too connects ascent to heaven with the shedding of the heavy garments of earthly existence and the donning of airy, angelic clothing. For Gregory, however, this transformation is linked to virtue. It is by living a life of asceticism, within the community of the church, that it becomes possible to participate in the divine glory, and replace one’s earthly body with a heavenly robe.

Without the heuristic comparison with heavenly ascent texts, and the stimulus provided by their accompanying scholarship, this study would have been much poorer. Many of the themes explored stem from the biblical text, and occur in Gregory’s Alexandrian predecessors, but the richness of possibilities they provide, and therefore the choices made by Gregory, only become apparent when a wide range of interpretations is displayed. Ascent to heaven as the ascent to the heavenly tabernacle/temple, in particular, comes from Christianity’s Jewish heritage, not from Platonism. And Jewish sources have provided the wherewithal to draw out the intricacies of Gregory’s tabernacle interpretation.
5.2 Gregory’s tabernacle interpretation

As a result not only of the heuristic comparison with heavenly ascent texts, but also of the thorough exploration of its biblical, Alexandrian and theological contexts, what has been learnt about Gregory’s tabernacle interpretation? These are the key ideas which have emerged:

- Gregory is drawing on longstanding traditions about heavenly ascent, going back to 1 Enoch 14, in which heaven is depicted as a temple, with God enthroned upon an angelic chariot in the holy of holies.
- As do his Alexandrian predecessors, he weaves Platonic assumptions into the biblical narrative.
- Following Philo, he uses the darkness of Exodus 20:21 as a symbol of the incomprehensibility of God. However, faithful to Exodus, he describes how, within that darkness, Moses had a vision of ‘the tabernacle not made with hands’ – there is ‘content’ to the darkness. But this is not an abandonment of apophasic: within the ἄδυτόν of the darkness is the tabernacle (τὰ ἄδυτα), within which is the ἄδυτόν of the holy of holies. And within the holy of holies are the cherubim who “cover the mysteries in the ark with their wings” (2.180).
- There is no mention in Life of Moses of a ‘sense of presence’, a phrase which scholars import from On the Song of Songs (Laird 2004, 199; Harrison 1992b, 77). Here the imagery is of ascent to a place, not a person. ‘The tabernacle not made with hands’ is not, however, an earthly, material place. In the Platonic tradition it represents the κόσμος νοητός – the realm of ideas. The heavenly ascent texts present a paradoxical place in which ice and fire coexist, larger rooms can fit inside smaller ones, and the temple is a living angelic structure. Gregory describes a multi-faceted experience: Moses sees a vision, in which each element has a symbolic meaning; but it is also a theophany (1.56), and reveals a new name for Christ (2.176).
- Gregory uses the heavenly and earthly tabernacles to lay out his theological ‘manifesto’, exploring the divinity of Christ, the incarnation, the use of divine names, the incomprehensibility of God, the angelic world, the church community and its worship, and virtuous living. The summit of the ascent is Christian doctrine.
- He is influenced by the interpretations of his Alexandrian predecessors, but has to make major changes in the light of the new orthodoxy. Christ is no longer one element of the tabernacle, but the tabernacle as a whole. And since Christ
participates in the infinity of God, he ends up with the paradoxical picture of an infinite tent.

- At the incarnation, the heavenly tabernacle is, as it were, turned inside out: the infinite becomes contained within a finite ‘tent’. Douglass call this a ‘metadiastemic intrusion’, and argues that in using it as a way of solving the gap between God and creation, Gregory is drawing upon the biblical “history of impenetrable, circumscribed spaces within which dwelt the inaccessible presence of God” (2005, 133).

- Gregory’s tabernacle imagery could not survive the fifth century Christological controversies because it implied too extrinsic a relationship between the divinity and humanity of Christ. It was not therefore picked up by later patristic authors.

- Gregory argues that the name ‘tabernacle’ is appropriate for Christ because the incarnate Christ, like the tabernacle, performed the impossible feat of containing the infinite, adiastemic God. It is, however, only one name among many, and does not give access to the essence of God. In sharp distinction from Clement, Gregory plays down the importance of the high priest’s petalon: no name gives access to the holy of holies.

- Thanks to Colossians 1:16, the heavenly tabernacle can represent both the pre-existent Christ, and the angelic powers created in Christ. Gregory attempts to map these powers onto the furniture of the tabernacle, in a style reminiscent of Philo’s cosmological interpretation. But in accommodating biblical verses such as Isaiah 11:1-3 and Romans 3:25, his interpretation loses consistency, and blurs the boundary between the angelic and the divine.

- By his use of the earthly tabernacle, Gregory subverts the framework of heavenly ascent. In 2.160 he makes it clear that not all are to aspire to follow Moses up the mountain. Heavenly ascent is not, for him, a ‘democratic’ ideal. It is reserved for the superheroes of the faith – Moses, David, Paul and John. Others should aspire to becoming a pillar or light in the earthly tabernacle. The message of the treatise is not about aspiring to a vision of heavenly mysteries, but belonging to the worshipping community on earth.

- The holy of holies of the earthly tabernacle represents the same mystery as climbing Mount Sinai to see the heavenly tabernacle. It symbolises the incomprehensibility and inaccessibility of God. Gregory uses it to issue a warning that hoi polloi should refrain from theological discussion. Holiness has
social consequences, and the aristocratic bishop wishes to keep that which is most sacred away from the common people.

- The heavenly and earthly tabernacles symbolise two communities: angelic and human, which will remain separate until the eschaton. Only then will the *unio liturgica* occur. Meanwhile, however, the worship of the earthly community is a reflection of the activities of the angels.

- Gregory interprets the priestly garments in terms of virtue. He is particularly anxious to stress the two-fold nature of virtue: “faith toward the divine and conscience toward life” (2.192).

- He describes the priestly robe as a light and airy garment, which contrasts with the heavy and fleshy garment of life. He is drawing on traditions of angelic priestly robes. He agrees with the heavenly ascent texts that the ultimate goal is to become like an angel, with the angelic state symbolised by a garment; but, in his ‘transformational mysticism’, the transformation involved is an ethical one.

- Neither the darkness nor the vision of the tabernacle are the end of Moses’ journey. He comes down the mountain to face the incident of the golden calf. Heavenly ascent is a preparation for pastoral responsibilities.

### 5.3 Mysticism, theology and politics

Scholars tend to favour one way of viewing Gregory’s works over others. According to Daniélou, *Life of Moses* “retrace les étapes de la vie spirituelle depuis ses origines jusqu’à la vie mystique” (1954, 10). He ties this understanding of the text to Gregory’s personal experience:

> Once freed from administrative burdens and the heat of theological controversy, Gregory now turned himself wholly towards the life of the spirit. It was a change which reflected the interior evolution which he had been undergoing. The writings that come from this period reveal an extraordinary originality and mastery of his subject. (2001, 9-10)

Similarly, Silvas concludes that in his latter writings, “Gregory himself has moved to another spiritual echelon. His words are lit up from within by a profound spiritual élan. He is deeply, personally engaged in the ultimate truths and beauties of which he speaks so eloquently” (2007, 56). As noted in 1.3.2, not everyone agrees. Heine, for example, argues that *Life of Moses* reflects Gregory’s polemical debates with Origenism and Eunomianism. He objects to a mystical interpretation of the treatise, both because *Life of Moses* does not set out clear-cut stages for the ascent of the soul, following rather the biblical chronology of Moses’ life, and because it “lacks any clear indication of the
concept of attaining 'union' with God” (1975, 109). Lim, meanwhile, as explored in 4.9.3, points out the social and political factors behind Cappadocian apophaticism.

Belief in a transcendent God shrouded in mystery

helped to preserve social solidarity and order by undermining the legitimacy of any differential claim to precise knowledge about the divine essence ... Henceforth, claims to virtue and consideration within Christian communities were to be based on the hierarchical factors of birth and ecclesiastical rank. (1995, 179)

Are these interpretations mutually exclusive?

The heavenly ascent texts used in this study combine psychology, theology, science and politics. In *1 Enoch*, Enoch dreams – a psychological state – of ascending to heaven, where he learns both about God – theology – and about rivers, mountains, rocks, winds and stars – cosmology. Embedded in the text is a polemic against the priests of the Jerusalem temple – politics. There has been much debate over the rival claims of ‘exegesis’ and ‘experience’. Are heavenly ascent texts literary, reflective creations working from the biblical text, or are they descriptions of personal experience?

Himmelfarb argues that the ascent apocalypses “are literary documents in which the depiction of the hero’s experience needs to be understood as an act of imagination, with its specifics determined by the author’s manipulation of conventions” (1993a, 98). Stone objects: “Religious experience always stood in the background, whether at first, second, or third remove” (2003b, 180). He admits, however, that recognising the influence of experience only produces the challenge of “how to assess it and how to integrate it into our understanding of ancient literature” (2003b, 180). No text is a clear window onto the experience of its author. Rowland has pointed out that “early Christianity emerged in a world where contact with the divine by dreams, visions, divination and other related forms of extraordinary insight was common” (Rowland & Morray-Jones 2009, 213). He sees dreams – “that tantalizing and inventive part of the human intellect” – as the nearest we can get to the visionary state, “in which the conscious experience merges in the unconscious in forms which are unpredictable and often highly charged” (Rowland & Morray-Jones 2009, 209). Some texts talk explicitly in terms of dreams: In the Book of the Watchers, Enoch reports, “I saw in my dream what I now speak with a tongue of flesh” (*1 Enoch* 14:2; Nickelsburg 2001, 251). Other texts indicate some form of ecstatic experience: In Revelation, John declares that he “was in the spirit” (1:10). Davila sees the ‘descender to the chariot’ in the Hekhalot texts “as a magico-religious practitioner with striking similarities to the cross-cultural practitioner known as the ‘shaman/healer’” (2006, 106). Experience, however, does not have to be dramatic. It can simply be a case of the heart being strangely warmed. And writers in the Alexandrian tradition seem to
use heavenly ascent language of a noetic, rather than an emotional, experience. For Clement, becoming high priest involves “distinguishing the objects of the intellect from the things of sense (διακρίναντα τὰ νοητὰ τῶν αἰσθητῶν)” (Strom. 5.39.4; van den Hoek 1988, 141). For Origen, ascent to God is achieved through biblical interpretation: To “seek the spiritual meaning of the word of God” is to “ride through the most spacious places of the mystical and spiritual understanding” (Comm. Rom. 7.11.3; Scheck 2002, 97). This thesis has not been a study of the phenomenology of mysticism, and it has therefore remained agnostic as to the experiences behind both Life of Moses and the heavenly ascent texts. However, there is no doubt that the authors of heavenly ascent texts were claiming a religious experience, either for themselves, or, more often, for their pseudepigraphic heroes. But this was not seen as simply a private, subjective experience. The throne of God is the epicentre of holiness and power. To claim knowledge of an ascent to that throne is to claim authority. As Rowland says of the apocalypses,

Unless we grasp the high view of authority inherent in these texts, we shall not fully appreciate the potentially exclusive view of the value and content of the revelations. After all, what the apocalypses purport to offer is not the mere opinion of the expositor but a divine revelation emanating either from the throne of God or from an angelic intermediary commissioned by God for that purpose. (1988, 181)

The authors of heavenly ascent texts were involved in the power politics of their day, and a vision of heaven was seen as a trump card, used both by disaffected minorities and by religious authorities trying to curb unruly enthusiasm. “The claim to direct revelation is used just as much by those who control the levers of religious power as those who do not” (Rowland 1988, 184). Himmelfarb sees in 1 Enoch a mild condemnation of the Jerusalem priesthood (1993a, 22). Schäfer understands it “as a devastating critique of the Temple in Jerusalem” (2009, 66): (Enoch’s) vision could imply that the holy of holies in the earthly Temple is empty, with God having withdrawn himself to his temple in heaven. The Qumran community, also estranged from the Jerusalem temple, maintained its identity and self-belief by turning instead to the heavenly temple. “The community ... functioned analogically to a community of priestly angels, officiating in the innermost sanctuary of the heavenly temple” (Dimant 1996, 98). This was a temporary measure:

The sectarians expected that at some point in the future they would come to control the Jerusalem Temple and to be able to operate it according to their legal rulings and sacrificial procedures. (Schiffman 1999, 276)

But claims of heavenly ascent were not only produced and treasured within rebellious prophetic movements. The rabbis appropriated ma’aseh merkavah to themselves, issuing warnings of dire consequences to keep everyone else away. Heavenly ascent texts are not disinterested descriptions of personal experiences, they are bids for religious power, attempts to give divine authority to the knowledge they present. But that is not to negate
their spiritual dimension. Lesses criticises Halperin for “reducing the religious goal of the Hekhalot texts to nothing more than a search for power and (refusing) to acknowledge that the framers of these texts sought in some of their rituals to attain a vision of the transcendent God” (1998, 32). Personal spiritual experience, scientific curiosity, and political agenda were all motors of heavenly ascent texts.

Can this multi-faceted understanding of heavenly ascent texts help to shape a rounded view of Gregory’s tabernacle imagery? The first thing to stress is that *Life of Moses* is a work of exegesis. Heine is right that “the stages Gregory sets forth are based on the chronology of Moses’ life, and what he discusses in each stage is controlled by what the imagery of the Biblical text suggests” (1975, 107). As pointed out by Laird, the ascent of Moses “is described as a movement from light to dark, a description rife with apophatic terminology and motifs, because the vocabulary and imagery of the scriptural text lends itself to this” (2004, 200). Exegesis, however, can still engage the imagination, and there are many choices to be made. To what extent those choices were guided by Gregory’s personal religious experience is impossible to ascertain. But it is possible to examine his elaborations of the biblical imagery, and discuss the extent to which they have been informed by mysticism, theology or politics.

As Harrison states, the word ‘mysticism’ “is notoriously difficult to pin down” (1992b, 61). She says that she has kept the term “because of its extensive use in the literature” (1992b, 62). Similarly, in the context of Jewish mysticism, Schäfer says that he uses the word “only because it is the label that scholarly tradition has long attached to the texts I will be treating” (2009, 23-4). For texts such as *Life of Moses*, Macleod prefers the term ‘mystical theology’, given that “Gregory never speaks of any religious experiences of his own” (1971, 363). McGinn, who sees mysticism “as the ongoing search for a heightened consciousness, or awareness, of the presence of the living God”, argues that for both Jews and Christians this search “is inherently biblical”. The mystical use of the Bible attempts “to find in the depths of the text a direct encounter with the divine presence” (2005, 86). As Katz points out, “mystics across traditions and cultures have always assumed that the sacred texts of their traditions are authentic centers of divine, transcendental, ultimate truth” (2000a, 14). This has not been a study of Gregory’s mysticism in general, but of his tabernacle imagery. Whereas Daniélou brings together imagery from *Life of Moses* and *On Song of Songs* to develop a unified understanding of Gregory’s mysticism, here the focus has been solely on *Life of Moses* 2.160-201. It has therefore been possible to use ‘heavenly ascent’ as a heuristic category,
rather than ‘mysticism’, thus sidestepping the need to define ‘mysticism’. Certainly in regard to this second theophany in Life of Moses, Heine is right that there is no imagery of union with God. Schäfer cautions that “we should take seriously the possibility that the history of research on mysticism – Jewish and non-Jewish alike – is deeply imbued with Christian theological assumptions and biases” (2009, 355). One of those biases is a tendency to define mysticism in terms of unio mystica. Scholars of Jewish mysticism have developed alternative categories to unio mystica, such as unio liturgica or angelification. Gregory, paradoxically, is a Christian writer who is closer to these ‘Jewish’ paradigms than to notions of union with God. He describes Moses being initiated into the divine mysteries (2.160) by ascending to the tabernacle not made with hands – the heavenly sanctuary, laid out along the same lines as the earthly tabernacle/temple. This vision, with its paradoxes and logical inconsistencies, has the dream-like quality written of by Rowland. A vision of a tabernacle – pillars, curtains, candlestick, altars ... – is somehow also a vision of the pre-existent Christ, and is equated with a name. The vision of Christ then morphs into a vision of the heavenly powers, with the ultimate mystery hidden by cherubim and seraphim. Moses is observing this, rather than becoming involved. There is no comment on his emotional reaction – emotions were left behind once he detached himself from the people (1.45-6). Gregory is drawing on ancient imagery, the same imagery as fed Jewish mysticism. He manipulates it, however, to fit new theological norms. Not only does he make the vision explicitly Christian, but he does so differently to predecessors such as Clement and Origen, because he has to ensure that Christ is fully God. Tabernacle imagery serves him particularly well because of its previous uses by Paul (Col 1:15-19, 2:9) and John (1:14) to convey the paradoxes of the incarnation. Just as the transcendent God was somehow to be found in the holy of holies of the tabernacle/temple, so the infinite God is fully present in both the earthly and heavenly Christ. It is when Gregory moves on to the earthly tabernacle and the priestly vestments that his political agenda becomes apparent. He has used the imagery of heavenly ascent only to undercut it. In To Theophilus, Against the Apollinarians he argues that had we all had a similar experience to Moses, Paul, Elijah, Ezekiel or Isaiah there would be no need for the incarnation (see 4.1.3). Here the logic is reversed: given the incarnation, there is no need to ascend to heaven. We become part of the body of Christ by participating in the earthly tabernacle. In his comments on the priestly vestments he once again picks up on a theme which occurs in Jewish mysticism, that of angelification. By putting on the priestly robe, we aim to become like the angels. He ties this angelification, however, to virtue. Participation in the divine is participation in what God does. In the background of his interpretation are theological debates
spiralling out of control, the growth of elaborate liturgies, and the need to contain ascetic movements within the church.

More work would need to be done in order to integrate this study of Life of Moses 2.160-201 into a more general picture of Gregory’s mysticism. However, as regards his tabernacle exegesis, he holds together mysticism, theology and politics. Under ‘mysticism’ might be included Moses’ ascent to a tabernacle made of spirits which is the radiating centre of holiness and which protects the incomprehensible essence of God; under ‘theology’ Gregory’s exploration of the application of the name ‘tabernacle’ to both pre-incarnate and incarnate Christ; under ‘politics’ the heavenly tabernacle as the source of authority to which only the privileged few have access. This holding together of what might be classed as different categories is typical of heavenly ascent texts. They all combine descriptions of religious experience with claims to authoritative knowledge. For Gregory, the high point of Moses’ ascent into the darkness of Mount Sinai is the mystery of Christian doctrine. The heavenly tabernacle is a type of the heavenly Christ. This mystery is beyond intellectual comprehension, it can only be grasped by faith; and only the select few, destined for positions of responsibility, should even attempt to do so. But its benefits are available to all through the community’s worship in the earthly tabernacle. Anyone can aspire to wear an airy, angelic robe by living a life of virtue, in which faith and practice go hand in hand.
6 BIBLIOGRAPHY

6.1 Notes on texts and translations

The text of the **Hebrew Bible** is taken from **BHS**, and of the **New Testament** from **NA**\textsuperscript{26}. The English translation used is the RSV.

The **Septuagint** text is taken from Rahlfs’ edition, and the translation used is *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (Pietersma & Wright 2007).

The texts and English translations of **Plato** and **Philo** are taken from the Loeb editions (Fowler et al. 1914-1935; Colson et al. 1929-62).

The text of **Gregory of Nyssa’s Life of Moses** is taken from Daniélou’s edition (2000). Musurillo (GNO 7,1) has also been consulted. The English translation used is Malherbe & Ferguson (1978). The text of Gregory’s other works is taken from Gregorii Nysseni opera (GNO), or, if not available there, from Patrologia graeca (PG).

The text of the **Babylonian Talmud** comes from the *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud* (Epstein 1962-1990); and of the **Hekhalot texts** from *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Schäfer 1981).

All other editions and translations are specified in situ.

6.2 Primary sources and secondary literature


---. 2008. *Translations of the Opera Minora Gregorii Prepared for the 11th International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa - September 17-20, 2008 Tübingen.* Permission was sought to make use of these translations, but no reply was received.


