

## Approaching the Divine Darkness Negative Theology in Clement and Gregory

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Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa are both famous for their negative theology. While intermediaries such as Origen were more reserved in the use of negative theology, Clement and Gregory were both outspoken about the ineffability and incomprehensibility of the divine nature.

The two seem to have had a common source in Philo of Alexandria and the biblical narrative about Moses who entered the darkness on Mount Sinai. Clement and Gregory, however, base their negative theologies on somewhat different assumptions.

Clement's approach to negative theology has often been described as largely "aphairetic", while Gregory's is seen as more radically "apophatic". While Clement derives his negative theology from a notion of God's oneness, with Gregory divine infinity takes center stage.

As we will see in the following, it may be argued that the differences are a matter of emphasis, but we should also be aware of how the arguments for negative theology were at least partly determined by the contexts in which the two developed their negative theology.

### Clement of Alexandria: God is One

Now, negative theology had already been a part of complex theological and philosophical debates, when Clement of Alexandria formulated his version at the turn of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Clement, like Philo before him, calls God "ineffable", and much like Philo, Clement, against Pagan polytheism as well as his "Gnostic" opponents, insists on the oneness of God.<sup>2</sup> God is "the good Monad" (τὴν ἀγαθὴν μονάδα), as Clement puts it in the *Protrepticus*, or "the One" (τὸ ἓν) or "the first principle" (ἀρχή), as he says in the fifth *Stromata*.<sup>3</sup>

Clement too makes use of the biblical narrative about Moses who, according to Exodus 20:21, met God in what the Septuagint calls the "thick darkness" (γνόφον) on Mount Sinai.<sup>4</sup> Philo had argued that what Moses realized when he entered the darkness, was that God's "incorporeal and invisible essence" (τὴν ἀόρατον καὶ ἀσώματον οὐσίαν) cannot be comprehended by any human being.<sup>5</sup>

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1 While there are precursors in Pagan philosophy, Philo of Alexandria is sometimes said to be "the father of negative theology" (Louth). Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007), p. 18. The notion of God as "ineffable" also appears in second century Middle-Platonists like Alcinous and Numenius, though it is contested to what degree these philosophers drew on Philo. See Deidre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock 2015), p. 75ff.

2 Clement refers to Philo as a Pythagorean. *Protr.* 9,88,3. In the first *Stromata*, Clement mentions Philo's book on the life of Moses. Clement, *Str.* I 153,2. There is not much negative theology in this context, though Clement mentions "the pillar of light" in the desert as an expression of God's "formless light" (φῶς ... ἀσχημάτιστον). Clement, *Str.* I 164,1. Clement, like other Christians, to a large degree followed what has been called the "Philonic" principle: God is "ineffable" since a name is always given by a "parent" that is ontologically superior to what is named. This idea can be recognized in early Christian apologetics such as Justin Martyr, who, similar to Philo, argued that since God is the unbegotten father of all, then God cannot be named. Justin, *Ap. Sec.* 6. Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence II – the way of negation, Christian and Greek* (Bonn: Hanstein 1986), p. 133.

3 *Str.* V 81,4.

4 For more on Moses according to Clement and Philo, see Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski, *Clement of Alexandria: A Project of Christian Perfection* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing 2008), p. 51ff.

Something similar is going on in Clement's fifth *Stromata*. When Moses approached the "thick darkness where God was", this signifies, according to Clement, that God is invisible (ἀόρατος) and ineffable (ἄρρητος).<sup>6</sup> Clement does not go as far as Philo in identifying the "thick darkness" with God's essence. God is not Himself "darkness", but the darkness refers to "the unbelief and ignorance of the multitude" that obstructs the gleam of truth, as Clement puts it.<sup>7</sup>

Clement paraphrases Plato when noticing that the "first and oldest principle" (πρώτη καὶ πρεσβυτάτη ἀρχή) of everything is difficult to find out and exhibit.<sup>8</sup> The reason is that no parts can be predicated to the Father of the universe, which is arguably a way of saying that God is simple, though Clement does not say so explicitly here.<sup>9</sup> Instead Clement describes God as "the One" (τὸ ἓν), that, much like the One of Plato's *Parmenides*, is indivisible (ἀδιαίρετον) and infinite (ἄπειρον) in the sense of not having any dimensions (ἀδιάστατον) or any a limit (πέρας).<sup>10</sup> As such the One is without form and name (ἀσχημάτιστον καὶ ἀωνόμαστον).<sup>11</sup> In other words, from God's oneness follows God's infinity and ineffability.

God's oneness determines how we can approach God through negative theology. A bit earlier in the fifth *Stromata*, Clement had already explained how God is contemplated through "contemplative analysis" (ἐποπτικὸν ἀναλύσει), understood as a process of taking away (ἀφελόντες) the physical properties and dimensions from objects. We eventually arrive at a point (σημεῖον) or a unit (μονάς) from which we finally strip position and thereby arrive at a notion of unity (νοεῖται μονάς).<sup>12</sup>

So far, Clement can, in the words of Raoul Mortley, be considered a representative of the method of abstraction similar to contemporary Middle Platonists such as Alcinous and Celsus.<sup>13</sup> However, Clement's "contemplative analysis" culminates in what could perhaps be called an apophatic leap of faith: By finally casting (ἐπιρρίψαμεν) ourselves into the greatness of Christ, we arrive at a holiness, says Clement, that consists in a thought (νοήσει) of the Almighty, by "knowing not what He is, but what He is not" (οὐχ ὃ ἐστίν, ὃ δὲ μὴ ἐστὶ γνωρίσαντες).<sup>14</sup>

5 Philo, *De Mut. Nom.* 7. God can only be known indirectly, as Moses learned when he was allowed to see God's back parts. Philo, *De Mut. Nom.* 7-14. Importantly, Philo applies a distinction between God's essence (οὐσία) and activities (ἐνέργεια) that was to become central to later negative theologies. Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1,47-49.

6 *Str.* V 78, 3. Cf. Philo, *Spec.* 1,47-49.

7 What Clement earlier on calls "the darkness of ignorance" (τῆς ἀγνοίας σκότει) is dispelled when we acknowledge our ignorance and seek the truth that is revealed through faith. *Str.* V 17,3. Seeking the truth is again contrasted with the ignorance of "the mob" using a quote from Plato. It could be argued that as a matter of negative theology, Philo is actually the more radical one in this, whereas Clement is more "Platonic". Already in the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Stromata*, Clement had explained that when Moses entered "the thick darkness where God's voice was", this refers to "the inaccessible and invisible notions about what is" (τοῦ ὄντος), but God Himself, says Clement, is "not in darkness or in place, but above both space and time, and qualities of objects." Clement, *Str.* II 6, 1.

8 *Str.* V 81,4.

9 *Str.* V 81,6.

10 But not infinite in the sense of being inexhaustible (ἀδιεξίτητον). *Str.* V 81,6. Cf. Plato, *Parm.* 137d. Here Clement arguably goes further than what Philo had done. According to Mühlenberg, Philo never called God "infinite" (ἄπειρον). See Ekkehard Mühlenberg, *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes bei Gregor von Nyssa: Gregors Kritik am Gottesbegriff der klassischen Metaphysik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1966), p. 58ff. But is this true?? See also John Whittaker, "Philological comments on the Neoplatonic notion of infinity" in R. Baine Harris, *The Significance of Neoplatonism* (Norfolk: International Society for Neoplatonic Studies 1976), p. 156f.

11 *Str.* V 82,1. This means, says Clement, that not even "the One", "Being" or "God" is a proper name for God.

12 *Str.* V 71,2-5.

13 Alcinous, *Did.* 10,4-6. Mortley 1986, p. 44. To what degree Clement simply takes over an apophatic approach has been discussed by scholars such as Deirdre Carabine, Henny Hägg and many others. I will not go into the technical details of the discussion here. See Henny Fiska Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006).

14 *Str.* V 71,4.

While Clement in this way could be said to pave the way for a truly apophatic theology it is equally the case that for Clement what we arrive at here is hardly a theory about how God can be described in apophatic terms. What we arrive at is silence. We only return to the realm of speech to the degree that the mystery is again clothed in language.

I will not go as far as some commentators, who have argued that Clement's theology as a theological discourse is, then, in fact not negative at all, but it seems that Clement's point is first of all that God can be known only to the degree that He reveals himself.<sup>15</sup> At least this was the point when Moses asked God to show Himself, which, says Clement, intimates how God can only be known by His own power (αὐτοῦ δυνάμει) as revealed in the incarnate Christ and the cross.<sup>16</sup>

## Gregory of Nyssa: God is Infinite Goodness

Now, in the works of Gregory of Nyssa, the darkness on Mount Sinai plays a more prominent role, especially in his later works. Gregory too was influenced by Philo, but his apophatic form of negative theology goes much further than what we find in Philo and Clement.<sup>17</sup>

In his mature commentary *The Life of Moses*, Gregory explains that entering the darkness, Moses had come to know that “what is divine is beyond all knowledge”.<sup>18</sup> It is true, of course, that we can talk of a kind of enlightenment which occurs when the darkness of impiety is left behind, but beyond this enlightenment we encounter what Gregory famously describes as a kind of “luminous darkness” that comes from the fact that God is “separated on all sides by incomprehensibility”.<sup>19</sup>

For Gregory the incomprehensibility of God has to do with the infinity of the divine nature, that is so central to his thought. Divine infinity is a theme already at the very beginning of *The Life of Moses*. The good has no limit in its own nature, says Gregory, and since God is “goodness in his very nature” (ἡ φύσις ἀγαθότης ἐστίν), then the divine nature must be thought of as unlimited and infinite.<sup>20</sup>

As has often been noticed the infinity of the good is, in other words, central to Gregory's negative theology.<sup>21</sup> It may even seem that Gregory derives the infinity of the divine nature from God's essential goodness, perhaps somewhat similar to how Clement had derived God's infinity from His oneness. However, even if God according to Gregory is “goodness in his very nature”, this does not mean that “good” is, then, a positive definition of God's essence like, for example, “ungenerate” was according to Gregory's Neo-Arian opponents.

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15 Jugrin has even argued that Clement's method is “actually not a form of negation at all, but a form of abstraction”. Daniel Jugrin, *The Way of ἀνάλυσις: Clement of Alexandria and the Platonic Tradition* in *Studia Philosophiae Christianae UKSW* 52 (2016) 2, p. 91. Cf. Hägg, pp. 154.

16 *Str.* V 71, 5. “[...]it was not without the wood of the tree that He came to our knowledge. For our life was hung on it, in order that we might believe.” Clement, *Str.* V 72, 3-4. Somewhat confusingly, Clement says elsewhere that God is ineffable in His own power. Clement, *Str.* V 65, 2.

17 See Albert-Kees Geljon, “Divine Infinity in Gregory of Nyssa and Philo of Alexandria” in *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (May, 2005), pp. 152-177.

18 Gregory, *De Vit. Mo.* 2,164.

19 Gregory, *De Vit. Mo.* 2,163. Gregory actually seems to be closer to Philo than Clement in this, although he does not say that the darkness refers to the divine essence as such. What is called darkness by scripture refers, says Gregory, to “the unknown and unseen”. Gregory, *De Vit. Mo.* 2,169.

20 The good is only limited by its opposite. Gregory, *De Vit. Mo.* 1,7. Gregory will later repeat that God is infinite because there is no limit to the good. Gregory, *De Vit. Mo.* 2,239. A very similar argument appears in Gregory, *Con. Eun.* 1.1.169-170. If the divine nature is incapable of degeneracy, it must be regarded as unlimited in its goodness. But the unlimited (τὸ ἀόριστον) is the same as the infinite (τῷ ἀπειρῷ).

21 Lucas F. Mateo-Seco & Giulio Maspero (ed.), *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa* (Leiden: Brill 2009), p. 424.

Naming God as “good” is the same (ταυτόν), says Gregory in his works against Eunomius of Cyzicus, as saying that God does not admit of evil (ἀνεπίδεκτόν τε πονηρίας).<sup>22</sup> When applied to the divine nature, it seems that even goodness must be an implicitly negative definition. This is, as Gregory explains in his letter to Ablabius, because the divine nature is infinite “in all respects” (κατὰ πάντα τρόπον ἐν ἀπειρίᾳ) and for this reason unlimited and incomprehensible.<sup>23</sup>

Where Clement like Philo had first of all defined God as One, the Monad or similar, for Gregory, God is now not so much defined as one or simple, and then, by derivation, as “infinite”.<sup>24</sup> Gregory and Clement agrees, to be sure, that God is both simple and infinite, but the infinity of God is much more central to Gregory than it was to Clement.

As just hinted at, a reason for this difference may be the theological debates that shaped their theological outlooks. Clement insisted on the oneness of God against polytheism and Gnostic opponents like Basilides.<sup>25</sup> For Gregory, however, the notion of God’s oneness had to be balanced by a notion of divine infinity in order to defend trinitarian orthodoxy against a too one-sided monotheism.<sup>26</sup>

Where divine simplicity had for Eunomius precluded a multiplicity of divine persons, Gregory adjusts the notion of divine simplicity in order to make it support the notion of divine infinity shared in equally by the divine persons. As Gregory argues against Eunomius, in the case of the divine persons, “the One” (τὸ ἓν) should not be conceived of as a singularity (μονότητι) that excludes a multiplicity of divine persons sharing the same essence.<sup>27</sup> Even if it can be said according to the Gospel that “only one is good” (εἷς ἐστὶν ὁ ἀγαθός), then this does not mean that the Father and the Son does not share equally in the infinite divine goodness.

The primacy of divine infinity does not mean, of course, that Gregory has nothing to say about divine simplicity. For example, in his homilies on the *Song of Songs*, having explained first how the infinite is not contained by anything, Gregory goes on to argue that the simple (ἀπλῆ) and uniform (μονοειδής) nature of God is, again, unlimited in its goodness, since there can be no limit to that which contains none of its contraries.<sup>28</sup>

It seems, however, that simplicity is here only mentioned rather *en passant*, at least in comparison with the passage in Clement mentioned in the above, where the oneness of God is more primary. At

22 Gregory, *Con. Eun.* 2,1,134.

23 Gregory, *Ad Abl.* 3,1,52. As Gregory puts it in *The Life of Moses*, the characteristic of the divine nature is to transcend all characteristics. Gregory, *De Vit. Mo.* 2,234.

24 As A. Meredith puts it: “[...]for Gregory, the supreme being, who is infinite and simple, is not the One, but the divine nature as expressed in the three persons of the Trinity.” Anthony Meredith, “The Divine Simplicity: *Contra Eunomium* I 223–241” in Miguel Brugarolas, ed., *Gregory of Nyssa: Contra Eunomium I, Vigiliae Christianae, Supplements, Volume: 148* (Leiden: Brill 2018), pp. 357-370.

25 “God is One (ἓν), as does not yet appear to Basilides.” Clement, *Str.* V 74,3-4.

26 For a discussion of the notion of God as the One or “monad” in Arianism, see Tomasz Stępień, Karolina Kochańczyk-Bonińska, *Unknown God, Known in His Activities: Incomprehensibility of God during the Trinitarian Controversy of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang 2018), p. 55. Arius was eager to describe God as μονάς. In other words, if a too rigid insistence on the unity or simplicity of God leads to subordinationism, then the underlying premises of negative theology must be adjusted accordingly. See, e.g., Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity (Oxford Early Christian Studies)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), p. 3. In addition to Neo-Arianism, Gregory had to deal with the idea often associated with Origen, that the fall happened as souls grew tired of contemplating God. See Ronald Heine, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life: A study of the relationship between edification and polemical theology in Gregory of Nyssa’s “De Vita Moysis”* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001), p. 53ff.

27 Gregory, *Con. Eun.* 3,9,20-21. The balance between one-sided monotheism and trinitarianism is also the theme of Gregory’s *Oratio Catechetica*.

28 Gregory, *In Cant. Cant.* 5,158.

any rate, the connection between simplicity and infinity does not make Gregory conceive of God as the One or a monad that can be reached through a process of abstraction.

Rather, because of the infinity of the good, it is, says Gregory, as if the ascent of the soul to God is always just beginning.<sup>29</sup> Even if there is a progress in the ascent to the good, this does not afford us with a positive or definite comprehension of the good.<sup>30</sup>

Where Clement saw God's unity as a moral ideal for imitation, Gregory to a larger degree emphasizes the infinity of moral progress.<sup>31</sup> As is repeatedly affirmed in *The Life of Moses*, because God is infinite, there can be no limit to moral and spiritual growth.

The linguistic counterpart to this growth is, arguably, the ongoing invention of new names for God by conception or *epinoia*. As Gregory famously explains in the passage about the darkness on Mount Sinai quoted above, concepts become idols (εἰδωλον) when they are imagined to comprehend the divine nature.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, we have to keep talking about God in apophatic terms in order not to think that we have arrived at a final definition of what cannot be defined.<sup>33</sup> In this way Gregory arrives at a more apophatic approach to negative theology than was the case in Clement.

## Conclusion

To conclude: In their negative theology Clement and Gregory had a common source in Philo of Alexandria, but they construed their negative theologies in somewhat different ways. It seems that Philo's account of Moses must have been inspirational for Gregory, as it was for Clement, but Gregory did not simply take over a tradition of negative theology that was already there.

Clement's negative theology was to a large degree *aphairetic*, as removal or abstraction was applied in order to arrive at a notion of God's unity. Gregory's would become more *apophatic*, as negation in the sense of unsaying must continually be applied in order to make up new language for the infinite God. These differences are also expressed in different understandings of moral and spiritual progress.

Nevertheless, the differences should not be overstated. What brings Clement and Gregory into conversation is, perhaps first of all, the fact that they write in a spiritual tradition tied together by certain biblical and theological narratives like that about Moses who entered the divine darkness.

Both Clement and Gregory affirm that what matters at end of the day is to follow God by imitating Christ.<sup>34</sup> Thus conceived, the aim or outcome of negative theology is perhaps not so much a theory about God as it is a reminder that we must always relate to God in and through practice.

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29 Gregory, *In Cant. Cant.* 5,159.

30 Gregory, *De Vit. Mo.* 2,238-239.

31 To believe in the Son is to become a unit (μοναδικόν), says Clement, while disbelief results in being "separated, disjoined, divided." Clement, *Str.* IV 157,2. The "gnostic soul" is consecrated to the light by a separation (χωρισμός) from the body and its passions. *Str.* V 67,1.

32 Gregory, *De Vit. Mo.* 2,165. Anyone who thinks that God is something to be known does not have life. Gregory, *De Vit. Mo.* 2,234.

33 In his polemics against Eunomius, Gregory can even argue that it is a matter of piety (εὐσεβὲς) to describe God in negative definitions. Gregory, *Con. Eun.* 2,1,581-582.

34 This was, as Gregory reminds us, what Moses learned when he only got to see God from behind. Gregory, *De Vit. Mo.* II 252. Clement, too, affirms that we cannot imitate the ineffable nature of God, but can only imitate God by imitating the works of Christ.