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## ***Epektasis* - The Perpetual Ascent of the Soul**

### **Philippians 3:12-14**

It is not that I have already achieved this. I have not yet reached perfection, but I press on, hoping to take hold of that for which Christ once took hold of me. My friends, I do not claim to have hold of it yet. What I do say is this: forgetting what is behind and straining towards (*epekteinomenos*) what lies ahead, I press towards the finishing line, to win the heavenly prize to which God has called me in Christ Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

### **The perpetual ascent of the soul**

If nothing comes from above to hinder its upward thrust (for the nature of the Good attracts to itself those who look to it), the soul rises ever higher and will always make its flight yet higher - by its desire of the heavenly things *straining ahead for what is still to come*,<sup>2</sup> as the Apostle says.

Made to desire and not to abandon the transcendent height by the things already attained, it makes its way upward without ceasing, ever through its prior accomplishments renewing its intensity for the flight. Activity directed towards virtue causes its capacity to grow through exertion; this kind of activity alone does not slacken its intensity by the effort, but increases it.

For this reason we also say that the great Moses, as he was becoming ever greater, at no time stopped in his ascent, nor did he set a limit for himself in his upward course. Once having set foot on the ladder which God set up (as Jacob says),<sup>3</sup> he continually climbed to the step above and never ceased to rise higher, because he always found a step higher than the one he had attained.

He denied the specious kinship with the Egyptian queen ... avenged the Hebrew... chose the desert way of life ... saw the brilliance of the light ... made his approach to the light ... brought his kinsmen and countrymen out to freedom ... saw the enemy drowning in the sea ... made camps under the cloud ... quenched thirst with the rock ... produced bread from heaven .. entered the darkness ... slipped into the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle not made with hands ... learned the secrets of the divine priesthood ... destroyed the idol ... supplicated the divine Being.

He shone with glory. And although lifted up through such lofty experiences, he is still unsatisfied in his desire for more. He still thirsts for that with which he constantly filled himself to capacity, and he asks to attain as if he had never partaken, beseeching God to appear to him, not according to his capacity to partake, but according to God's true being.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 3:12-14

<sup>2</sup> Philippians 3:13

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 28:12

<sup>4</sup> *Life of Moses* 2.225-30 (pp.113-4)

## **“Arise, come, my companion, my fair one, my dove” (Song of Songs 2:10)**

[In the Song of Songs] we now see the bride being led by the Word up a rising staircase by the steps of virtue to the heights of perfection. First the Word sends her a ray of light through the windows of the prophets and the lattices of the Law. He exhorts her to draw near to the light and to become beautiful by being transformed into a dove's image in the light. The bride at this point partakes in the good as much as she can. Then he starts again to draw her to participate in a higher beauty, as if she had never tasted it. Thus, as she progresses, her desire grows with each step. And, because there is always an unlimited good beyond what the bride has attained, she always seems to be just beginning her ascent.

Therefore the Word says once again to the bride whom he has awakened; “Arise.” And when she has come to him, he says, “Come.” For one who has been called to rise in this way can always rise further, and one who runs to the Lord will always have wide open spaces before him. And so we must constantly rise and never cease drawing closer. As often as the bridegroom says “Arise” and “Come,” he gives the power to ascend to what is better. Thus you must understand what follows in the text.

When the bridegroom exhorts the bride who is already beautiful to become beautiful, he clearly recalls the words of the Apostle who bids the same image to be transformed “from glory to glory” [2 Cor 3:18]. By glory he means what we have grasped and found at any given moment. No matter how great and exalted that glory may be, we believe that it is less than that for which we still hope. Although she is a dove by what she had achieved, nevertheless, the bride is bidden to become a dove once again by being transformed into something better.<sup>5</sup>

## **The infinity of God and the journey (Rowan Williams)**

If the Christian life is a journey into God, it is a journey into infinity – not an abstract ‘absoluteness’ but an infinity of what Gregory simply calls ‘goodness’, an infinite resource of mercy, help and delight. And because of its limitless nature, this journey is always marked by *desire*, by hope and longing, never coming to possess or control its object.

This is perhaps Gregory's most vivid way of expressing the Christian conviction of God's transcendent freedom and objectivity: faith is *always*, not only in this life, a longing and trust directed away from itself towards an object to which it will never be adequate, which it will never comprehend.

God is what we have not yet understood, the sign of a strange and unpredictable future.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily 5* (McCambley, pp.119-20)

<sup>6</sup> R. Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990)<sup>2</sup>, pp.57-8