

MOSES AND THE VISION OF GOD

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(A commentary on Exodus, Ch. 33, v. 11-23.)

HOW was it that Moses, who had seen God in so many visions and to whom he had spoken 'as man is wont to speak to his friend', should now ask God to reveal himself as though these former theophanies, which we believe on the authority of the scriptures, had never been? Has he who showed himself over and again really not yet appeared to Moses? And yet the divine voice does now in some sort grant this prayer, not denying this grace, yet dashing Moses's hopes again by explaining that the desire of his heart is beyond the capacity of mortal man. But God also says that there is 'a place' near him, and in this place 'a rock', and 'a cleft' within the rock where he bids Moses go. There God's right hand will protect the face of his servant while he passes, and when he has gone by, Moses shall see his back. Thus Moses will believe he has seen God who is the goal of his desire, and the promise of the divine voice shall not be void.

These events considered in a literal manner will remain obscure to an inquiring mind, and indeed be incompatible with a right idea of God; for only visible entities can be said to have front and back, and visibility implies the limitation of a body and of physical being. . . . We shall get further if we interpret these events in a spiritual and analogical sense.

Just as a heavy round object rolling down a mountain side from the summit, even if no one speeds its course, hurtles on by means of its own ever increasing inner impulsion till it comes to rest in the plain, that is, if nothing gets in its way; so too the soul, which has an inherent upward trend, flies more eagerly and swiftly to heaven and rises ever higher when it is delivered from the weight of earthly desires. For when nothing earthly stands in the way, the soul's very nature impels it towards the Good, which necessarily draws to itself all who lift their eyes to contemplate its beauty. Thus the soul continually rises above itself, impelled by its ardent desire, striving (as the Apostle says) for the things which are above, and reaching ever greater heights in its upward surge. And what it has seen ever spurs it on to try and behold

what is as yet unseen; the soul burns with ever increasing desire which informs its soaring flight with an unceasing movement of ascent, drawing renewed power from truth already realized. Spiritual activity alone is capable of being increased and not diminished in strength when it is used and expended.

So we can say of this great servant of God that he never stood still and never interrupted his ascent nor ever contemplated any limit to his upward movement towards God; and having once set foot upon the ladder on which, as Jacob said, God leaned (Gen. 28, 13), he continued to mount step by step. This ladder could never fail to lead him upward, for each rung led to yet another. He refused to pass himself off as the son of the queen of Egypt, he avenged the Hebrew, he went out into the desert and led a solitary life untroubled by human vexations, he guarded his thoughts as a flock of quiet sheep, he saw the burning brightness of the divine light, he cast off his shoes so as to approach more easily. He freed those who were his own kith and kin, he saw his enemies covered by the waters of the sea, he was led into the cloud of light, he stilled the thirst of his people with water out of the rock, he brought down bread from heaven, he stretched forth his hand and defeated his enemy, he heard the sound of the trumpet, he went into the darkness, he entered the hidden places of the uncreated tabernacle, he was instructed in the mysteries of the priesthood, he removed the idol, he won God's grace and pardon for his people, and re-established the law they had maliciously violated. His face shone with glory. And yet, after God had raised him to such great heights, he still burned with desire, his soul was famished and parched as though it had never been filled, and he prayed to see God, not in the manner of mortal man but even as he is in himself.

It seems to me that this was the mark of a man moved by an immense and ardent love of God; hope drew him on unceasingly, the thought of things already understood feeding his desire for things as yet hidden. This supreme lover of Beauty, believing that what he had seen in the past was only as it were an image and foretaste of what was yet to come, now sought to apprehend the archetype beyond the image. This then is the meaning of his bold prayer upon the mountain: he wants to enjoy Beauty face to face, not merely reflected as in a mirror and in images. It is in the refusal of his request that the divine voice

grants his prayer, thereby opening up profound depths of thought in a few words. God consents to do the will of Moses but without at the same time granting him fulfilment and repose; for no one can see God in a way that sets a term to his desire for vision. The real vision of God consists in this—that we who lift up our eyes to seek him never cease to desire him. That is why God says: 'Thou canst not see my face: for man shall not see me and live.' (Exodus 33, 20.)

It is not, of course, as though God's face could be a cause of death to the beholder, for how could the principle of life ever bring death to those who approach? Indeed, God's nature is the source of life and his essential being is beyond all human conceptions. Anyone who thinks God can be seized by our apprehensions mistakes his own thoughts for God's reality and has no life in him. But 'He who is' is life itself, and we cannot conceive what essential life is and means. If this principle of life is inaccessible to our notions, it follows that what our minds can actually grasp cannot be life itself.

Thus the desire of Moses was fulfilled in that he remained insatiable and ever unfulfilled. He learned from God's words that the divine nature is infinite and not subject to any limitations. Were we to conceive God as in any way limited we should have to consider further what lies beyond those limits, for what is limited is necessarily contingent. Thus the atmosphere is the limit of things that are on earth, and water the limit of beings that are in the sea: fish are surrounded by water, birds by air in such a way that they are completely contained and bound within their respective elements. Necessarily therefore, if we think of God as limited, he too would have to be contained within a reality of the same kind as himself. . . .

If we therefore desire to see divine Beauty we must ever reach out for it, steadfast in our course and letting our longing show us the way to God. And this is how we really see God—in our endless and unfulfilled desire for him. What we can already see must ever fire us with yet greater desire for vision, and thus nothing will ever be able to limit or interrupt our upward way to God; for on the one hand Beauty itself is infinite, and on the other, our desire for it cannot be stilled.

But what is this place that is said to be 'with' God? What is this 'Rock', and what the 'cleft' within the Rock? What is

meant by the right hand of God protecting or shielding the opening of the cave in the Rock? What is the passing of God? What are his shoulders, his back which he promised to let Moses see when he asked to behold his face? Each of these realities must indeed be great, and commensurable with the dignity of God who provides them if Moses is to think these promises greater and more sublime than the visions already vouchsafed to him in the past. How could we understand the profound meaning of these words if not by the help of him whom Moses wanted to see and who makes all things work together for him who loves God? 'Behold', he says, 'there is a place with me.' This fits in with what we have already heard. He speaks of a 'place' but does not mean one which can be measured and determined, for infinite things are not subject to measurement. By analogy with a measurable surface he leads his hearer's mind to apprehend the idea of infinite and unlimited reality. And I think this is the meaning. God is saying: 'As thou, Moses, art continually drawn onward by thy great desire for what is not yet actual, and as thou art never weary of keeping steadfast upon thy straight course, and settest no limit to thy search for Beauty, ever striving for fuller vision; know then that there is a place near me whose boundaries thou canst never find nor measure in thy course. But in another sense thy course, thy movement is a kind of standing still, for I have said: "I will set thee upon a Rock" and "thou shalt stand upon a Rock".'

This is indeed a great paradox—that standing still and moving forward should be one and the same thing. For it would seem obvious that a man who is moving forward cannot be standing still at the same time; and if he is stationary, surely he cannot be making any progress? Yet in this instance his progress consists in standing still. What does this mean? How can a man whose heart is weak and wavering, who is unstable in pursuing the Good, who is 'moved and carried about by the wind' (James 1, 6) as the Apostle says, who is tossed hither and thither by conflicting opinions about the nature of life—how can such a man ever scale the sublime heights of virtue? He is like a man trying to climb up a sand-dune; he seems to be covering much ground with his purposeful strides, yet the shifting sand carries him right down to the bottom of the hill again. There is movement indeed, but no sort of progress. But once a man, as the Psalmist

says, has withdrawn his feet 'out of the pit of misery and the mire of dregs' (Ps. 39, 3) and set his foot upon this Rock—the Rock which is Christ, the fulness of all virtue—his course is the more rapid the more (according to Paul's counsel) he is confirmed and established in goodness. His stability, his 'standing still' is to him as it were a sure wing in his upward flight to God. Thus in showing Moses this hidden place near him, God is encouraging him to stay his course; and in promising to set him upon the Rock, he is showing him the divine Way he is to walk.

As for the place within the Rock which the scriptures call a 'cleft' or a 'hollow place', the divine Apostle has interpreted it as the place not made with hands, prepared to receive us in heaven when our earthly tent shall perish. Indeed, he who has 'finished his course' (2 Tim. 4, 7) in this wide and vast stadium which the divine voice called 'a place'; he who has 'kept the faith' and set his feet upon the Rock (as it is mysteriously written)—this man shall be crowned with the crown of justice by the Master of the Games. The scriptures have various names for this reward. The 'cleft' is what is elsewhere called the paradise of pleasure, eternal tabernacle, the Father's house, the bosom of Abraham, kingdom of the just, waters of refreshment, heavenly Jerusalem, kingdom of heaven, reward of the elect, crown of graces, crown of beauty, a strong tower, joy of feasts, dwelling with God, seat of justice, renowned place and secret of the tabernacle. We will therefore say that the entry of Moses into the Rock signifies the same as all these expressions. For St Paul calls Christ the Rock, and we believe that the substance of our hopes is contained in Christ. Any goodness we have, is ours only in and through Christ, and if we know ourselves to have a share of his virtue, we can also be certain that we abide in him.

The man who has gone so far and whom God has protected with his right hand as he promised (the hand of God is evidently essential creative power itself, the Only Begotten God who made all things, who is, as he himself says, the 'Way' of those who run in the race, the 'Rock' of those who are confirmed in virtue, and the 'Mansion' of those who have entered into their rest)—this man will hear the voice of God calling him and will find himself behind God, that is, he will follow the Lord his God as the law commands. David understood this call when he said: 'He will overshadow thee with his shoulders' (Ps. 62, 9), which

means, you shall be stationed behind God (for the shoulders are behind). And when David cried out: 'My soul hath stuck close to thee: thy right hand hath received me' (Ps. 90, 4), you see how well the meaning of the psalm fits in with the story of Moses. . . . And when the Lord, who had spoken to Moses in this oracle, himself came down on earth to fulfil his own law, he told his disciples clearly what he had previously hidden in symbols: 'If any man will come after me . . .', not 'Go before me'. And in answer to a question about eternal life he said the same thing: 'Come and follow me . . .'. Now one who follows only sees the back of the one who leads the way.

This then is the teaching Moses received when he asked to see God; 'seeing God' is nothing but following him with heart and soul wherever he leads. Indeed, the 'passing' of God means that God leads the way for those who follow him. It is impossible for one ignorant of the road to travel safely without following the guide who goes on ahead and shows him the way. If he follows, ever keeping his guide's back in view, he will not get lost. If he turns aside, or tries to make out his guide's face, he ceases to keep to the route mapped out for him. That is why God said: 'Thou shalt not see my face'; that is to say, do not run on ahead trying to see the face of God who leads the way, else you will soon find yourself running in the opposite direction. . . . Moses never saw God face to face; he only saw his back. How vital, then, it is for us to learn to follow God, when even Moses himself, towards the end of his life, after all his sublime ascensions and all his glorious and terrible theophanies, was hardly judged worthy to receive the grace of learning this lesson.

Translated by ELISABETH STOPP

NOTE. This translation from the *Vita Moysis* of St Gregory of Nyssa is based on the text of Migne (Vol. 44, 398D-409B) but taking into consideration the variations in the translation of J. Daniélou, s.j. (*Contemplations sur la Vie de Moïse*, Série 'Sources Chrétiennes', Editions du Cerf, Paris 1941). Père Daniélou has collated several MSS, and also the papyrus text (Philologus XLIII); he has introduced important improvements on the text of Migne, which is virtually a reproduction of sixteenth-century Greek and Latin editions.