

Gregory of Nyssa
THE LIFE OF MOSES

TRANSLATION, INTRODUCTION AND NOTES
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SELECTIONS FROM BOOK I¹

22. Moses went down to Egypt and he took with him his foreign wife and the children she had borne him. Scripture says that an angel encountered him and threatened death. His wife appeased the angel by the blood of the child's circumcision. Then he met Aaron, who had himself been brought by God to this meeting.

23. Later, the people in Egypt were gathered by Moses and Aaron into a general assembly and their release from bondage was announced all around to those who were already distressed by the hardships of their labors. Report of this came to the tyrant himself. When he heard it his anger at both the overseers of the work and the Israelites themselves was greater than ever. The levy of bricks to be made was increased and a harsher command was sent down, not only to those slaving with the clay but also to those laboriously gathering chaff and straw.

24. Pharaoh (for this was the Egyptian tyrant's name) attempted to counter the divine signs performed by Moses and Aaron with magical tricks performed by his sorcerers. When Moses again turned his own rod into an animal before the eyes of the Egyptians, they thought that the sorcery of the magicians could equally work miracles with their rods. This deceit was exposed when the serpent produced from the staff of Moses ate the sticks of sorcery—the snakes no less! The rods of the sorcerers had no means of defense nor any power of life, only the appearance which cleverly devised sorcery showed to the eyes of those easily deceived.

25. When Moses saw that all the subjects agreed with their leader in his evil, he laid a blow upon the whole Egyptian nation, sparing no one from the calamities. Like an army under orders, the very elements of the universe—earth, water, air, and fire which are seen to be in everything—cooperated with him in this attack on the Egyptians, and changed their natural operations to serve human purposes. For by the same power and at the same time and place the disorderly were punished and those free of wrong did not suffer.

26. At the command of Moses all the water in Egypt turned into blood. The fish were destroyed because the water thickened, but to the Hebrews alone the blood was water when they drew it. Found among the Hebrews this water provided an occasion for the magicians to use their art in making the water appear bloody.

27. Similarly frogs covered Egypt in large numbers. Their breeding in these numbers was not natural, but Moses' command changed the normal density of frogs. All the land was in a sorry state, for the Egyptians' houses were being overrun with these creatures, while the Hebrews were free of this hateful plague.

28. Likewise, there was no distinction between night and day to the Egyptians, who lived in unchanging gloom. To the Hebrews, however, nothing was out of the ordinary. It was the same with all the other things—the hail, the fire, the boils, the gadflies,⁵³ the flies, the cloud of locusts: Each had its natural effect on the Egyptians. The Hebrews learned of the misfortune of their neighbors by report, since they experienced no similar attack themselves.

Then the death of the firstborn made the distinction between Egyptians and Hebrews still sharper. The Egyptians were dismayed, lamenting the loss of their dearest children, while the Hebrews continued to live in total serenity and safety. Salvation was assured to them by *the shedding of the blood*. At every entrance both the doorposts and the lintel joining them were marked with blood.

29. While the Egyptians were downcast at the fate of their firstborn and each individual was lamenting his sufferings and those of everyone else, Moses led the exodus of the Israelites. He had

¹ Note: In Book I, St. Gregory is describing the story of Moses according to the Historical or Literal Sense of Scripture.

previously prepared them to take away with themselves the wealth of the Egyptians on the pretext that it was a loan.⁵⁸ The history goes on to say that when they were three days out of Egypt, the Egyptian was angry that Israel did not remain in slavery, and after mobilizing all his subjects for war, he pursued the people with his cavalry.

When they saw the deployment of the cavalry and infantry, they were panic-stricken since they were inexperienced in war and untrained in such sights, and they rose up against Moses. Then the history tells the most marvellous thing about Moses. He did two distinctly separate things at once: By spoken word he encouraged the Israelites and exhorted them not to abandon high hopes, but inwardly, in his thoughts, he pleaded with God on behalf of those who cowered in fear and he was directed by counsel from above how to escape the danger. God himself, the history says, gave ear to his voiceless cry.

30. By divine power a cloud led the people. This was no ordinary cloud, for it was not composed of the vapors or exhalations as normal clouds are. The winds did not press the vapors of the air into a misty composition; it was something beyond human comprehension.⁶² Scripture testifies that there was something amazing about that cloud. When the rays of the noonday sun shone with great heat, the cloud was a shelter for the people, shadowing those below it and moistening with a light dew the fiery heat of the atmosphere. During the night it became a fire, leading the Israelites as in a procession with its own light from sunset to sunrise.

31. Moses himself watched the cloud, and he taught the people to keep it in sight. When the cloud had guided them along their course, they came to the Red Sea, where the Egyptians coming from behind with their whole army surrounded the people. No way of escape from their terrors was open to the Israelites in any direction, because they were trapped between their enemies and the water. It was then that Moses, urged on by divine power, performed the most incredible deed of all. He approached the bank and struck the sea with his rod. The sea split at the blow, just as a crack in glass runs straight across to the edge when a break occurs at any point. The whole sea was split like that from the top by the rod, and the break in the waters reached to the opposite bank. At the place where the sea parted, Moses went down into the deep with all the people and they were in the deep without getting wet and their bodies were still in the sunlight. As they crossed the depths by foot on dry bottom, they were not alarmed at the water piled up so close to them on both sides, for the sea had been fixed like a wall on each side of them.

32. When Pharaoh and the Egyptians ran after them headlong into the sea along that newly cut path, the walls of water came together again and the sea rushed in upon itself to assume its previous form, becoming to the eye a single body of water. By that time the Israelites were already resting on the opposite bank from the long and strenuous march through the sea. Then they sang a victory song to God for raising a monument unstained with blood on their behalf since he destroyed in the water the whole army of the Egyptians—their horses, infantry, and chariots.

SELECTIONS FROM BOOK II: CONTEMPLATION OF THE LIFE OF MOSES²

Deliverance Announced

54. Laying aside these matters for a later point in our discussion where we shall give a fuller interpretation of them in their proper place, let us now turn to what is at hand. Moses, who had been strengthened by the shining light and had acquired such a brother as an ally and supporter, boldly delivered to the people the words of freedom, brought to their remembrance the nobility of

² Note: In Book II, St. Gregory offers a reading of the story according to the Spiritual or Allegorical sense of Scripture.

their fathers, and gave his judgment how they could escape from their wretched labor of brick making.

55. What then does the history teach us by this? That he who has not equipped himself by this kind of spiritual training to instruct the multitude must not presume to speak among the people. For you see how, while he was still young and had not yet matured to so lofty a degree of virtue, two men who were quarreling did not consider his peaceful advice worth accepting, yet now he addresses tens of thousands in the same way. The history all but cries out to you not to be presumptuous in giving advice to your hearers in your teaching unless the ability for this has been perfected in you by a long and exacting training such as Moses had.

56. When Moses had spoken these excellent words and had offered his hearers freedom and had strengthened their desire for it, the enemy was provoked and increased the suffering of those who hearkened to his speech. This is not unlike what happens now. For many of those who have accepted the word as a liberator from tyranny and have identified themselves with the Gospel are today still threatened by the Adversary with onslaughts of temptations.

57. Many of them do become more firmly established in their faith as they are hardened by these grievous assaults, but some of the weaker ones are beaten to their knees by these misfortunes and say outright that it would have been more useful for them not to have heard the message of freedom than to endure these things for freedom's sake.

58. The same thing happened when the Israelites through meanness of spirit blamed those who proclaimed to them deliverance from servitude. But the Word will not cease at all from leading on toward the Good, even if he who is yet young and immature in understanding should, childlike, be fearful of the strangeness of temptations.

59. For this demon who does men harm and corrupts them is intensely concerned that his subjects not look to heaven but that they stoop to earth and make bricks within themselves out of the clay. It is clear to everyone that whatever belongs to material pleasure consists assuredly of earth or water, whether one is concerned with the pleasures of the stomach and the table or with the pleasures of wealth.

60. The mixture of these elements becomes clay and is so called. Those who yearn after the pleasures of clay and keep on filling themselves with them never keep the space which receives them full; for although it is always being filled, it becomes empty again before the next pouring. In the same way the brick maker keeps on throwing yet more clay into the mould while it is constantly being emptied. I think that anyone can easily perceive the meaning of this figure by looking at the appetitive part of the soul.

61. For if he who fills his desire in one of the things which he pursues should then incline his desire to something else, he finds himself empty again in that regard. And if he should fill himself on this, he becomes empty and a vacant container once more for something else. And we never stop doing this until we depart from this material life.

62. The straw and its chaff which those subject to the tyrant's orders were required to mix in the brick are interpreted by both the divine Gospel and the sublime voice of the Apostle as material for the fire.

The Plagues on Egypt

63. Whenever someone who excels in virtue wishes to draw those who have been enslaved by trickery to a life philosophical and free, the one who schemes against our souls with many different deceits (as the Apostle says) knows how to introduce the devices of trickery against the divine law.

I am speaking here of the Egyptian serpents in the text, that is, of the many different evil tricks which the rod of Moses destroyed. We have probably already sufficiently interpreted the rod.⁸⁸

64. Now he who possesses that invincible rod of virtue which consumes the rods of magic progresses along his course to greater marvels. Marvels are not performed for the purpose of terrifying those who happen to be present, but they look to the benefit of those being saved. By these very marvels of virtue the enemy is defeated and his own people are strengthened.

65. If we first learn the general spiritual intent of miracles, we would then be able to apply this insight to individual miracles. True doctrine conforms to the dispositions of those receiving the word, for although the word presents to all equally what is good and bad, the one who is favorably disposed to what is presented has his understanding enlightened, but the darkness of ignorance remains with the one who is obstinately disposed and does not permit his soul to behold the ray of truth. If our general understanding of these things is not false, the specific items would certainly not be different since the individual part is demonstrated with the whole.

66. So then, it is not marvelous at all that the Hebrew, although living in the midst of foreigners, remains unaffected by the evils of the Egyptians. One can also see the same thing happening now in populous cities where people are holding contradictory opinions. To some, the stream of faith from which they draw by means of the divine teaching is fresh and clear, but to others, who live as the Egyptians do and draw by means of their own evil presuppositions, the water becomes corrupted blood.

67. And many times the master of deceit endeavors to turn the drink of the Hebrews also into blood by polluting it with falsehood, that is, by presenting our doctrine to us as different from what it really is. But he cannot make the water wholly unusable, even if he should easily turn it red by his trickery. For since he pays no attention to the optical illusion, the Hebrew drinks the true water, even though he is successfully misled by his adversaries.

68. The same applies to the frogs—ugly and noisy amphibians, leaping about, not only unpleasant to the sight, but also having a foul-smelling skin—they entered the houses, beds, and storerooms of the Egyptians, but they did not affect the life of the Hebrews.

69. The breed of frogs is obviously the destructive offspring of the evil which is brought to life from the sordid heart of men as though from some slimy mire. These frogs overrun the houses of those who choose to live the Egyptian life, appearing on the tables, not even sparing the beds, and entering the very storerooms.

70. One sees in the sordid and licentious life that which is indeed born out of clay and mire and that which, through imitation of the irrational, remains in a form of life neither altogether human nor frog. Being a man by nature and becoming a beast by passion, this kind of person exhibits an amphibious form of life ambiguous in nature. In addition, one will also find the evidences of such an illness, not only on the bed, but also on the table and in the storeroom and throughout the house.

71. For such a man shows his profligacy in everything so that everyone readily recognizes the life of the profligate and the life of the pure man by what is valued in each one's household. In the house of the one there are frescoes on the wall which by their artful pictures inflame the sensual passions. These things bring out the nature of the illness, and through the eye passion pours in upon the soul from the dishonorable things which are seen. But in the house of the prudent man there is every precaution and foresight to keep the eye pure from sensual spectacles.

72. The table of the prudent man is similarly found to be pure, but that of the man wallowing in the mire is frog-like and fleshy. And if you search the storeroom, that is to say the secret and

unmentionable things of his life, you will discern there in his licentiousness a much greater pile of frogs.

The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart and Free Will

73. Let us not be astonished if the history says that the rod of virtue did these things to the Egyptians, for it also says that the tyrant was hardened by God. Now, how could he be condemned if he were disposed by divine constraint to be stubborn and obstinate? Somewhere the divine Apostle also expresses the same thought: *Since they refused to see it was rational to acknowledge God, he abandoned them to shameful passions*, speaking about those who commit sodomy and those who disgrace themselves by dishonorable and unmentionable profligacy.

74. But even if what has been said before is so stated by Scripture, and God does in this way entirely give up to dishonorable passions the one who gives himself up to them, still Pharaoh is not hardened by the divine will nor is the frog-like life fashioned by virtue. For if this were to be willed by the divine nature, then certainly any human choice would fall into line in every case, so that no distinction between virtue and vice in life could be observed. People live differently—some live uprightly in virtue while others slide into vice. One would not reasonably attribute these differences in their lives to some divine constraint which lies outside themselves. It lies within each person's power to make this choice.

75. Who it is who is delivered up to shameful affections can be clearly learned from the Apostle: It is he who does not like to have God in his knowledge. God delivers up to passion him whom he does not protect because he is not acknowledged by him. But his failure to acknowledge God becomes the reason why he is being pulled down into the passionate and dishonorable life.

76. It is as if someone who has not seen the sun blames it for causing him to fall into the ditch. Yet we do not hold that the luminary in anger pushes into the ditch someone who does not choose to look at it. Rather, we would interpret this statement in a more reasonable manner: It is the failure to participate in the light that causes the person who does not see to fall into the ditch. In the same way, the thought of the Apostle should be clear, that it is those who do not acknowledge God who are delivered up to shameful affections, and that the Egyptian tyrant is hardened by God not because the divine will places the resistance in the soul of Pharaoh but because the free will through its inclination to evil does not receive the word which softens resistance.

77. In the same way also, when the rod of virtue appeared among the Egyptians, it made the Hebrews pure from the frog-like life but showed the Egyptians to be full of this illness.

78. When Moses stretched forth his hands on the Egyptians' behalf, the frogs were instantly destroyed. This can also be seen happening now. For those who perceive the outstretched hands of the lawgiver—you understand, surely, what the figure says to you, and perceive in the lawgiver the true Lawgiver and in his outstretched hands him who stretched forth his hands upon the cross⁹⁸—those then who for a short time have lived with these sordid and frog-like thoughts, if they look to him who stretched forth his hands on our behalf, are set free from their evil life as their passion is put to death and left stinking.

79. Truly, after the death of the frog-like emotions, the former manner of life of those who have been delivered from such an illness becomes to them a foul and odorous memory which disgusts the soul in shame. It is as the Apostle says to those changed from evil to virtue: *What did you get from this? Nothing but experiences that now make you blush*.

80. In keeping with this insight of mine, consider the air which is darkened to the Egyptians' eyes by the rod while to the Hebrews' it is illuminated by the sun. By this incident the meaning which we have given is confirmed. It was not some constraining power from above that caused

the one to be found in darkness and the other in light, but we men have in ourselves, in our own nature and by our own choice, the causes of light or of darkness, since we place ourselves in whichever sphere we wish to be.

81. According to the history, the eyes of the Egyptians were not in darkness because some wall or mountain darkened their view and shadowed the rays, but the sun cast its rays upon all equally. Whereas the Hebrews delighted in its light, the Egyptians were insensitive to its gift. In a similar manner the enlightened life is proposed to all equally according to their ability. Some continue on in darkness, driven by their evil pursuits to the darkness of wickedness, while others are made radiant by the light of virtue.

82. Perhaps someone, taking his departure from the fact that after three days of distress in darkness the Egyptians did share in the light, might be led to perceive the final restoration which is expected to take place later in the kingdom of heaven of those who have suffered condemnation in Gehenna. For that *darkness that could be felt*, as the history says, has a great affinity both in its name and in its actual meaning to the *exterior darkness*. Both are dispelled when Moses, as we have perceived before, stretched forth his hands on behalf of those in darkness.

83. In the same way we would perceive the true meaning of the *furnace ashes* which, according to the text, produced painful boils on the Egyptians. In the figure of what is called the "furnace" we perceive the threatened punishment of fire in Gehenna which touches only those who imitate the Egyptians in their manner of life.

84. If anyone is truly an Israelite, a son of Abraham, and looks to him in life in such a way as to show by his own free will his kinship in race to the elect people, he is kept unharmed from that painful fire. The interpretation of Moses' outstretched hands which we have already given may become for those others also the healing of pain and the deliverance from punishment.

85. If one follows the sequence of our earlier investigations, he will have no trouble attaching to each plague the corresponding perception: those light gadflies which tormented the Egyptians with their unseen bites, the flies which clung painfully with their bites to their bodies, the tillage which was ravaged by the locusts, and the storms from heaven which rained down hailstones.

86. The Egyptians' free will caused all these things according to the preceding principle, and the impartial justice of God followed their free choices and brought upon them what they deserved. As we follow closely the reading of the text at hand, let us not draw the conclusion that these distresses upon those who deserved them came directly from God, but rather let us observe that each man makes his own plagues when through his own free will he inclines toward these painful experiences. The Apostle says the same thing when talking to such a person: *Your stubborn refusal to repent is only adding to the anger God will have toward you on that day of anger when his just judgments will be made known. He will repay each one as his works deserve.*

87. What we are describing is like some destructive and bilious humor which arises in the intestines because of a dissipated life. When the physician induces vomiting by his medicines, he does not become the cause of the sickness in the body, but on the contrary it is disorderly eating habits which bring it about; medical knowledge only brought it into the open. In the same way, even if one says that painful retribution comes directly from God upon those who abuse their free will, it would only be reasonable to note that such sufferings have their origin and cause in ourselves.

88. To the one who has lived without sin there is no darkness, no worm, no Gehenna, no fire, nor any other of these fearful names and things, as indeed the history goes on to say that the plagues of Egypt were not meant for the Hebrews. Since then in the same place evil comes to one but not

to the other, the difference of free choices distinguishing each from the other, it is evident that nothing evil can come into existence apart from our free choice.

The Death of the Firstborn

89. Let us proceed to what follows in the text. We have learned through the things examined already that Moses (and he who exalts himself by virtue in keeping with his example), when his soul had been empowered through long application and high and lofty life, and through the illumination which came from above, considered it a loss not to lead his countrymen to the life of freedom.

90. When he came to them, he implanted in them a more intense desire for freedom by holding out worse sufferings to them. Intending to remove his countrymen from evil, he brought death upon all the firstborn in Egypt. By doing this he laid down for us the principle that it is necessary to destroy utterly the first birth of evil. It is impossible to flee the Egyptian life in any other way.

91. It does not seem good to me to pass this interpretation by without further contemplation. How would a concept worthy of God be preserved in the description of what happened if one looked only to the history? The Egyptian acts unjustly, and in his place is punished his newborn child, who in his infancy cannot discern what is good and what is not. His life has no experience of evil, for infancy is not capable of passion. He does not know to distinguish between his right hand and his left.¹¹¹ The infant lifts his eyes only to his mother's nipple, and tears are the sole perceptible sign of his sadness. And if he obtains anything which his nature desires, he signifies his pleasure by smiling. If such a one now pays the penalty of his father's wickedness, where is justice? Where is piety? Where is holiness? Where is Ezekiel, who cries: *The man who has sinned is the man who must die and a son is not to suffer for the sins of his father?* How can the history so contradict reason?

92. Therefore, as we look for the true spiritual meaning, seeking to determine whether the events took place typologically, we should be prepared to believe that the lawgiver has taught through the things said. The teaching is this: When through virtue one comes to grips with any evil, he must completely destroy the first beginnings of evil.

93. For when he slays the beginning, he destroys at the same time what follows after it. The Lord teaches the same thing in the Gospel, all but explicitly calling on us to kill the firstborn of the Egyptian evils when he commands us to abolish lust and anger and to have no more fear of the stain of adultery or the guilt of murder. Neither of these things would develop of itself, but anger produces murder and lust produces adultery.

94. Since the producer of evil gives birth to lust before adultery and anger before murder, in destroying the firstborn he certainly kills along with it the offspring which follows. Take for an example a snake: When one crushes his head he kills the rest of the body at the same time.

95. This would not have happened unless the blood which turns aside the destroyer had been poured out on our doors. And if it is necessary to perceive the meaning presented here more fully, the history provides this perception in both the killing of the firstborn and the safeguarding of the entrance by blood. In the one the first impulse to evil is destroyed, and in the other the first entrance of evil into us is turned away by the true Lamb. For when the destroyer has come inside, we do not drive him out by our own devices, but by the Law we throw up a defense to keep him from gaining a foothold among us.

96. Safety and security consist in marking the upper doorpost and the side posts of the entrance with the blood of the lamb. While in this way Scripture gives us through figures a scientific understanding of the nature of the soul, profane learning also places it before the mind, dividing

the soul into the rational, the appetitive, and the spirited. Of these parts we are told that the spirit and the appetite are placed below, supporting on each side the intellectual part of the soul, while the rational aspect is joined to both so as to keep them together and to be held up by them, being trained for courage by the spirit and elevated to the participation in the Good by the appetite.

97. As long, therefore, as the soul is kept safe in this manner, maintaining its firmness by virtuous thoughts as if by bolts, all the parts cooperate with one another for good. The rational for its part furnishes safety to its supports, and in its turn receives from them an equal benefit.

98. But if this arrangement should be upset and the upper become the lower—so that if the rational falls from above, the appetitive and spirited disposition makes it the part trampled upon—then the destroyer slips inside. No opposition from the blood resists his entrance; that is to say, faith in Christ does not ally itself with those of such a disposition.

99. For he says first to anoint the upper doorpost with blood, then to touch both side doorposts in the same way. How therefore would one anoint the upper first unless it be found on top?

100. Do not be surprised at all if both things—the death of the firstborn and the pouring out of the blood—did not happen to the Israelites and on that account reject the contemplation which we have proposed concerning the destruction of evil as if it were a fabrication without any truth. For now in the difference of the names, Israelite and Egyptian, we perceive the difference between virtue and evil. Since the spiritual meaning proposes that we perceive the Israelite as virtuous, we would not reasonably require the firstfruits of virtue's offspring to be destroyed but rather those whose destruction is more advantageous than their cultivation.

101. Consequently we have been taught by God that we must destroy the firstfruits of the Egyptian children so that evil, in being destroyed at its beginning, might come to an end. And this insight agrees with the history, for the protection of the Israelite children took place through the pouring out of blood in order that good might come to maturity. But what would come to maturity in the Egyptian people was destroyed before it matured in evil.

The Departure from Egypt

102. What follows agrees with our spiritual understanding of the text. For Scripture requires that the body of the lamb, whose blood was displayed on the doors and separated the people from the destroyer of the firstborn, become our food.

103. The demeanor of those eating this food was to be intense and earnest, not like that of those who enjoy themselves at banquets, whose hands are relaxed and whose clothes are loose and whose feet are unprepared for travel. But everything was the opposite. Their feet were covered with sandals, a belt bound the clothing at the waist, and the staff to repel dogs was held in hand.

104. And to them in this condition was presented meat without any artfully prepared sauces but cooked upon any fire that happened to be available. The guests eagerly devoured it in great haste until the entire body of the animal was consumed. They ate whatever was edible around the bones, but they did not touch the entrails. To break the bones of this animal was one of the things forbidden. Whatever might be left of the meat was consumed by the fire.

105. From all this it is evident that the letter looks to some higher understanding, since the Law does not instruct us how to eat. (Nature which implants a desire for food in us is a sufficient lawgiver with regard to these things.) The account rather signifies something different. For what does it matter to virtue or vice to eat your food this way or that, to have the belt loose or tight, to have your feet bare or covered with shoes, to have your staff in your hand or laid aside?

106. It is clear what the traveler's equipment figuratively stands for: It commands us explicitly to recognize that our present life is transient. Already at birth we are driven by the very nature of things toward our departure, for which we must carefully prepare our hands, feet, and the rest.

107. So that the thorns of this life (the thorns would be sins) may not hurt our naked and unprotected feet, let us cover them with shoes. The shoes are the self-controlled and austere life which breaks and crushes the points of the thorns and prevents sin from slipping inside unnoticed.

108. The tunic flowing down over the feet and reaching to the soles would be a hindrance to anyone who would diligently finish the divine course. The tunic accordingly would be seen as the full enjoyment of the pursuits of this life, which the prudent reason, like a traveler's belt, draws in as tightly as possible. The place around which the belt passes shows that it is to be understood as prudence. The staff for repelling animals is the message of hope, by which we support the weariness of the soul and ward off what threatens us.

109. The food placed before us from the fire 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. Instead we consign this food to the fire.

110. In order that these figures may be made clear, let us explain that whichever of the divine commands are readily perceived should not be followed sluggishly or by constraint, but we should be like those who are hungry and eagerly fill up on the things set before them, so that the food may become provision for our well-being. But 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.

111. Anyone instructed in the Scriptures surely knows that instead of "Spirit" Scripture often thinks of it and designates it as "fire." We are also led to this understanding by the announcement of Wisdom: *Do not try to understand things that are too difficult for you*, that is to say, *Do not break the bones of Scripture, for you have no need [to see with your eyes] those things that are hidden*.

The Wealth of Egypt

112. Thus Moses led the people out of Egypt, and everyone who follows in the steps of Moses in this way sets free from the Egyptian tyrant all those guided by his word. Those who follow the leader to virtue must, I think, not lack the wealth of Egypt or be deprived of the treasures of the foreigners, but having acquired all the property of their enemies, must have it for their own use. This is exactly what Moses then commanded the people to do.

113. No one who has listened to this carelessly would accept the advice of the lawgiver if he enjoined those in want to rob and so became a leader in their wrongdoing. If someone looks to the laws which follow, which from beginning to end forbid wrongdoing to one's neighbor, he could not truthfully say that the lawgiver commanded these things, even though to some it seems reasonable that the Israelites should have exacted the wages for their work from the Egyptians by this device.

114. Yet there is no less ground for complaint; this justification does not purify such a command of falsehood and fraud, for the person who borrows something and does not repay the lender is deceitful. If he borrows something not belonging to him, he does wrong because he

commits fraud. But even if he should take what is rightly his own he is still correctly called a deceiver since he misleads the lender into hoping that he will be repaid.

115. The loftier meaning is therefore more fitting than the obvious one. It commands those participating through virtue in the free life also to equip themselves with the wealth of pagan learning by which foreigners to the faith beautify themselves. Our guide in virtue commands someone who “borrows” from wealthy Egyptians to receive such things as moral and natural philosophy, geometry, astronomy, dialectic, and whatever else is sought by those outside the Church, since these things will be useful when in time the divine sanctuary of mystery must be beautified with the riches of reason.

116. Those who treasured up for themselves such wealth handed it over to Moses as he was working on the tent of mystery, each one making his personal contribution to the construction of the holy places. It is possible to see this happening even now. For many bring to the Church of God their profane learning as a kind of gift: Such a man was the great Basil, who acquired the Egyptian wealth in every respect during his youth and dedicated this wealth to God for the adornment of the Church, the true tabernacle.

The Cloudy Pillar

117. Let us return to the point where we digressed. When those who already look to virtue and follow the lawgiver in life have left the borders of the Egyptians’ dominion behind, the assaults of temptations in some way pursue them and bring on distress and fears and threats of death. When frightened by these things, those newly established in the faith lose all hope for what is good. But if Moses or some leader of the people like him happens along, he will counsel them against fear and will strengthen their downcast minds with the hope of divine help.

118. This help will not come unless the heart of the leader speaks with God. Many of those who occupy a position of leadership are concerned only with outward appearances; of those hidden things which are observed only by God they have hardly a thought. But in the case of Moses it was not so. While he exhorted the Israelites to be of good courage, he did cry out, although outwardly making no sound to God, as God himself bears witness. The Scripture teaches us, I think, that the voice which is melodious and ascends to God’s hearing is not the cry made with the organs of speech but the meditation sent up from a pure conscience.

119. To the one who finds himself in these circumstances the brother appears limited in the help he renders for the great struggles—I mean that brother who met Moses as he was going down to Egypt at the divine bidding, whom Scripture has understood as being in the rank of angels. Then occurred the manifestation of the divine nature which manifests itself in the way that one is capable of receiving.¹³³ What we hear from the history to have happened, then, we understand from contemplation of the Word always to happen.

120. Whenever someone flees Egypt and, after getting outside its borders, is terrified by the assaults of temptation, the guide produces unexpected salvation from on high. Whenever the enemy with his army surrounds the one being pursued, the guide is forced to make the sea passable for him.

121. In this crossing the cloud served as guide. Those before us interpreted the cloud well as the grace of the Holy Spirit, who guides toward the Good those who are worthy.¹³⁵ Whoever follows him passes through the water, since the guide makes a way through it for him. In this way he is safely led to freedom, and the one who pursues him to bring him into bondage is destroyed in the water.

Crossing the Red Sea

No one who hears this should be ignorant of the mystery of the water. He who has gone down into it with the army of the enemy emerges alone, leaving the enemy's army drowning in the water.

122. For who does not know that the Egyptian army—those horses, chariots and their drivers, archers, slingers, heavily armed soldiers, and the rest of the crowd in the enemies' line of battle—are the various passions of the soul by which man is enslaved? For the undisciplined intellectual drives and the sensual impulses¹³⁸ to pleasure, sorrow, and covetousness are indistinguishable from the aforementioned army. Reviling is a stone straight from the sling and the spirited impulse is the quivering spear point. The passion for pleasures is to be seen in the horses who themselves with irresistible drive pull the chariot.

123. In the chariot there are three drivers whom the history calls "viziers." Since you were previously instructed in the mystery of the side posts and upper doorpost, you will perceive these three, who are completely carried along by the chariot, as the tripartite division of the soul, meaning the rational, the appetitive, and the spirited.¹⁴⁰

124. So all such things rush into the water with the Israelite who leads the way in the baleful passage. Then as the staff of faith leads on and the cloud provides light, the water gives life to those who find refuge in it but destroys their pursuers.

125. Moreover, the history teaches us by this what kind of people they should be who come through the water, bringing nothing of the opposing army along as they emerge from the water. For if the enemy came up out of the water with them, they would continue in slavery even after the water, since they would have brought up with themselves the tyrant, still alive, whom they did not drown in the deep. If anyone wishes to clarify the figure, this lays it bare: Those who pass through the mystical water in baptism must put to death in the water the whole phalanx of evil—such as covetousness, unbridled desire, rapacious thinking, the passion of conceit and arrogance, wild impulse, wrath, anger, malice, envy, and all such things. Since the passions naturally pursue our nature, we must put to death in the water both the base movements of the mind and the acts which issue from them.

126. Just as unleavened bread was eaten in the mystery of the Pasch (which is the name of the sacrificial victim whose blood prevents the death of the one using it), even so the Law now commands us to eat unleavened bread at the Pasch (unleavened would be unmixed with stale yeast). The Law gives us to understand by this that no remnant of evil should mix with the subsequent life. Rather we should make a totally new beginning in life after these things,¹⁴⁵ breaking the continuity with evil by a radical change for the better. Thus also he means here that after we have drowned the whole Egyptian person (that is every form of evil)¹⁴⁷ in the saving baptism we emerge alone, dragging along nothing foreign in our subsequent life. This is what we hear through the history, which says that in the same water the enemy and the friend are distinguished by death and life, the enemy being destroyed and the friend given life.

127. Many of those who receive the mystical baptism, in ignorance of the commandments of the Law, mix the bad leaven of the old life with the new life. Even after crossing the water they bring along the Egyptian army, which still lives with them in their doings.

128. Take for instance the one who became rich by robbery or injustice, or who acquired property through perjury, or lived with a woman in adultery, or undertook any of the other things against life which have been forbidden before the gift of baptism. Does he think that even after his washing he may continue to enjoy those evil things which have become attached to him and yet be freed from the bondage of sin, as though he cannot see that he is under the yoke of harsh masters?

129. For uncontrolled passion is a fierce and raging master to the servile reasoning, tormenting it with pleasures as though they were scourges. Covetousness is another such master who provides no relief to the bondsman, but even if the one in bondage should slave in subservience to the commands of the master and acquire for him what he desires, the servant is always driven on to more. And all the other things which are performed by evil are so many tyrants and masters. If someone should still serve them, even if he should happen to have passed through the water, according to my thinking he has not at all touched the mystical water whose function is to destroy evil tyrants.