



The “Place of God”: Biblical Exegesis and Spirituality in Evagrius Ponticus

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Abstract: This article examines Evagrius Ponticus’s spirituality, centering on the metaphor of “the place of God” (τόπος Θεοῦ). It argues that Evagrius defines this “place” not as a geographical location but as the “formless state” of the intellect (νοῦς), attainable through practices such as “pure prayer” and the acquisition of impassibility (ἀπάθεια). The analysis employs close textual and biblical exegesis (Exod 24:10–11; Ezek 1:26; 10:1) to demonstrate how Evagrius’s thought highlights the inner transformation of the intellect. This purification, in turn, facilitates a direct, contemplative encounter with God, illustrating the profound integration of lived spiritual experience with his method of interpreting Scripture.

Keywords: Evagrius Ponticus, biblical exegesis, spirituality, divine light, Exod 24:10–11

The purpose of this article is to explore Evagrius Ponticus’s core spiritual concepts, focusing on his complex understanding of the “place of God” (τόπος Θεοῦ), the transformative state of impassibility (ἀπάθεια), and the culminating experience of the vision of “formless” divine light (φῶς/ φέγγος). The primary intention is to provide an in-depth analysis of how these interconnected elements form a coherent spiritual system within Evagrius’s ascetic and contemplative framework, offering a nuanced perspective on the journey of the human intellect (νοῦς) toward union with God.

The article’s methodology involves a comprehensive textual analysis of Evagrius’s works, guided by his definitions and descriptions of these theological concepts. This includes identifying and explaining key Greek terms from Evagrian writings to support the interpretations. The analysis also utilizes scriptural sources, particularly the Septuagint (LXX) and Masoretic Text (MT) (Exod 24:10–11; Ezek 1:26; 10:1), to emphasize Evagrius’s allegorical exegesis and the internalization of biblical topographies. Furthermore, it integrates a comparative and exegetical approach to trace the spiritual understanding of these concepts, along with historical and philosophical contextualization (e.g., Alexandrian tradition, Stoicism).

Through detailed textual analysis, this article aims to significantly enhance the academic understanding of Evagrian spirituality by highlighting the originality of his experiential approach, particularly his direct descriptions of luminous visions. Unlike the veiled accounts provided by other early Christian authors, Evagrius explicitly describes the light observed during prayer, acknowledging its spiritual significance while noting the dangers of demonic delusion and the necessity for discernment.

This unique specificity makes him an exception in the Christian literature of his time, as contemporary ascetic writings often lack such detailed accounts. It also emphasizes his ongoing relevance for early Christian thought and contemporary theological dialogue on spirituality and mysticism.

1. The “Pure Intellect”

Evagrius Ponticus (345-399 AD) is considered one of the notable speculative mystics, viewing the intellect (νοῦς) as an intuitive faculty essential for acquiring divine knowledge and attaining union with the divine (de Andia 2005, 73). The intellect is the core of personal identity (Dysinger 2005, 177–78), the seat of the indelible image of God, and the organ through which humans know God (Tobon 2011, 54). While Evagrius mainly emphasizes the intellect, he consistently regards the whole person, explicitly seen as the “image of God,” as being oriented towards a personal encounter with God through knowledge (γνώσις) (Bunge 2022, 136). For Evagrius, knowing God is not a dialectical process but a direct intuition: “The knowledge of God does not require a dialectical soul, but one who sees.” (*Capita Gnostica* 4.90, S2 [PO 28, 175])¹ In *Capita cognoscitiva* 34, Evagrius states: “The intellect is a temple of the Holy Trinity.” (Νοῦς ἐστὶ ναὸς τῆς ἁγίας Τριάδος) (Muyldermans 1931, 377) It is precisely this intrinsic quality of the intellect that enables it to know God (*Liber practicus* 49 [SC 171, 613]).

Evagrius asserts that God is not a being like other and therefore cannot be examined or defined through philosophical or scientific ways (*Fragmentum ex libro Gnosticus inscripto* 41 [SC 356, 166–67]).² Just as God is “beyond all sensory perception and conception” (ὕπὲρ πᾶσαν αἴσθησιν καὶ ἔννοιαν) (*De oratione* 4 [PG 79, 1168]), being immaterial (ἄυλος) (*De oratione* 67 [PG 79, 1182]), without quantity and shape (ἄποσος καὶ ἀσχημάτιστος) (*De oratione* 68 [PG 79, 1182]), and without form (μορφή) (*De oratione* 114 [PG 79, 1191]), so too, the true nature of the intellect is

¹ In the Platonic tradition, dialectic was regarded as the first and highest expression of philosophy (so that the philosopher had to be διαλεκτικώτατος—“perfect in dialectic”). Nevertheless, the knowledge of God transcends philosophical knowledge, as it represents a mystical vision that occurs in the presence and union with God. See *Capita Gnostica* 4.89, S2 (PO 28, 175); cf. Ramelli 2015, 245.

² “Every proposition has as [its—D.J.] predicate a kind, a difference, a species, a property, an accident, or the compound of those things: but one cannot accept anything that has been said about the Holy Trinity. Let the indescribable be worshipped in silence (Σιωπῇ προσκυνεῖσθω τὸ ἄρρητον).” (Young et al. 2024b, 133) See also *Fragmentum ex libro Gnosticus inscripto* 27 (SC 356, 132–33): “Do not speak about God thoughtlessly, and never define the divine. Definitions, after all, are for things that come into being and are composite”; *Capita cognoscitiva* 20 (Muyldermans 1931, 376): “In what concerns God, this is something evidently impossible—since the knowledge of Being is un-revelatory and has no parallel to knowledge of being.” (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001b, 525) Cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001a, 524, n. 90.

formless and immaterial (*Kephalaia Gnostika* 3.31, S2 [PO 28, 111]).³ That which was made to receive the immaterial and formless God is, by its very essence, immaterial and formless (Tobon 2011, 50): “Never give a shape (σχηματίξης) to the divine as such when you pray, nor allow your intellect (νοῦς) to be imprinted (τυπώω) by any form (μορφή), but go immaterial to the Immaterial and you will understand (ἀλλ’ αὖλος τῷ αὐλῳ πρόσιθι, καὶ συνίσσεις).”⁴ (*De oratione* 67 [PG 79, 1182]; cf. Casiday 2006b, 193)

“Having come to be in prayer (προσευχῇ), [the intellect—D.J.] enters into the formlessness (ἐν ἀνειδέος), which is called the ‘place of God’ (τόπος Θεοῦ).”⁵ (*Capita cognoscitiva* 20 [Muyldermans 1931, 376]; cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001b, 525)

“The place of God” is, by definition, “formless” (ἀνειδέος), which means that the intellect⁶ itself, when it becomes “the place of God,” is freed from any form of self-generated imagery. The term ἀνειδέος also appears associated with γνῶσις (divine knowledge), indicating an immaterial and formless knowledge, in contrast to the false visions induced in the intellect by the demon through phantasms (φαντασία).⁷ Evagrius equates the attainment of the “formless” state with the “place of God.” (*Capita cognoscitiva* 20 [Muyldermans 1931, 376])

In *De malignis cogitationibus* 41 (13–5 [SC 438, 292]), the “pure νοῦς” is called “the throne of God” (διὸ καὶ θρόνος λέγεται θεοῦ νοῦς καθαρός), “since God is said to be ‘seated’ where he is known” (ἐκεῖ γὰρ λέγεται καθέζεσθαι ὁ θεὸς ἐνθα γινώσκεται). Evagrius chooses the opening verse from Isaiah’s vision of God (Isa 6:1: “I saw the Lord”). The key to interpretation should not be literal, because there is no

³ “It is possible to speak of the unity of the intellect; but of its nature one cannot speak, for there is no knowledge of the quality of a thing composed of neither form nor matter.” (Young et al. 2024a, 271)

⁴ See also *De oratione* 114 (PG 79, 1191): “Do not seek at all to receive a form (μορφήν), shape (σχήμα) or colour (χρῶμα) at the time of prayer (τῆς προσευχῆς καιρῷ).” (Casiday 2006b, 198)

⁵ See also *Capita cognoscitiva* 22 (Muyldermans 1931, 376): “The intellect (νοῦς) sometimes goes from one representation (νοήμα) to other representations (νοήματα), sometimes from one contemplation (θεωρήμα) to other contemplations (θεωρήματα), {and again from a representation (νοήμα) to a contemplation (θεωρήμα)} and from a contemplation (θεωρήμα) to representations (νοήματα). But there is a (time) when it runs from an imageless state (ἀνειδέου καταστάσεως) to representations (νοήματα) or to contemplations (θεωρήματα) and back again from these to the formless state (ἀνειδέου καταστάσεως). This thing happens within it in the time of prayer (προσευχῆς).” (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001b, 525)

⁶ Regarding the concept of the “formless intellect,” in the state of pure prayer, see *Antirrhetikos* 7.31 (Frankenberg 1912a, 535): “Against the thought of vainglory (κενοδοξία) that appears to us in the condition of pure prayer (προσευχῆς καθαρᾶς) and likens the intellect (νοῦς) to the form (μορφή) that it wants, although the intellect (νοῦς) is invisible (ἀόρατος) and formless (ἀείδεος), and depicts it [the intellect—D.J.] praying (προσευχόμενον) to the divine (θεότης).” (Brakke 2009, 154)

⁷ See *De oratione* 69 (PG 79, 1182): “When the envious demon is unable to set the intellect in motion by memory (μνήμη) during prayer (προσευχῇ), then he forces the temperament of the body (σώματος) into making some strange apparition (φαντασίαν) in the intellect and shaping (μορφῶσαι) the intellect. And the intellect will bend easily since it has the habit of being linked with representations (νοήμασι), and the intellect that was rushing toward immaterial (αὐλῳ) and formless (ἀειδέου) knowledge (γνῶσιν) is cheated (ἀπατάται), accepting smoke (καπνὸν) instead of light (φωτὸς).” (cf. Casiday 2006b, 193)

physical throne in Isaiah's vision. What Isaiah saw with his "prophetic eye," Evagrius says, was his most authentic self (his "rational nature"), which became "the throne of God" by "receiving in itself the knowledge of God." (Casiday 2006a, 115)⁸ Evagrius writes about the "throne of God" in the same way he writes about the "place of God."

2. The Mental "Representations"

Following the Greek philosophical tradition, Evagrius identifies the intellect (νοῦς) as the seat of "representations" (νοήματα). Spiritual knowledge (γνώσις πνευματική) occurs through the means of "representations." As Antoine Guillaumont points out, the Evagrian term νόημα refers to the image evoked by the perceiving a sensible object (αἰσθητὸν πρᾶγμα), similar to what the Stoics called φαντασία, a term usually translated as "representation." The verb τυποῦν signifies the "imprinting" or "impression" (τύπωσις) left by this image on the intellect, thus echoing the Stoic idea mentioned by Diogenes Laertius (*Vitae philosophorum* 7.45.10–7.46.1 [Hicks 1925, 154–55]).

In Aristotle, νόημα is based on the image produced by perceiving a sensible object (φάντασμα), but it differs from this in that, once received by the intellect, the image is in a sense "conceptualized." (*De anima* III, 431b–436a [Polansky 2007, 481 sq.]) Probably, this conceptual dimension explains Evagrius' preference for the Aristotelian term νόημα over the Stoic one, φαντασία. The Stoics distinguished between φαντασία (the representation resulting from the direct perception of sensible objects) and φάντασμα (the image of an absent object, recalled from memory, or of an unreal object, like one in a dream) (cf. *Vitae philosophorum* 7.50.1–9 [Hicks 1925, 158–59]).

In this context, Evagrius' terminology aligns more with Aristotle's, who used the term φαντασία to refer to imagination. Evagrius uses this term, in the plural, to denote the "imaginings" (φαντασίαι) that occur during sleep (*Liber practicus* 54 [SC 171, 624, 626]), as well as for images of objects stored in memory (*De malignis cogitationibus* 4 [SC 438, 162, 163]; 2 [SC 438, 154, 156]). Evagrius distinguishes between representations that leave an imprint on the intellect and those that do not (Guillaumont 1998, 24–28): "Among representations (νοήματα), some imprint (τυπόω) and shape (σχηματίζω) our governing faculty (τὸ ἡγεμονικόν), and others only provide

⁸ See *Schol* 300 *ad Prov* 25.5 (SC 340, 392): "... his own intellect (νοῦς), which is said to be the throne of God (θρόνος Θεοῦ). For nowhere else is it natural for wisdom and knowledge and righteousness to dwell, except in a rational nature (φύσει λογικῇ); but all these things are Christ (ταῦτα δὲ πάντα ἐστὶν ὁ Χριστός)." (SC 340, 393)

⁹ Regarding the νοῦς or its contemplative activity understood as the "throne of Christ," see *Schol* 1 *ad Ps* 9.5 (2); *Schol* 4 *ad Ps* 46.9 (2); *Schol* 1 *ad Ps* 88.5 (2); *Schol* 8 *ad Ps* 131.11 (2). Cf. Stewart 2001, 200, n. 125. For Evagrius, as with other ancient Fathers, the Old Testament theophanies are, in fact, Logophanies. See *Capita Gnostica* 4.41, S2 (PO 28, 155). Cf. Bunge 2022, 164, n. 162.

knowledge (γνώσις), without imprinting (τυπώ) or shaping (σχηματίζω) the intellect (νοῦς).” (*De malignis cogitationibus* 41.1–3 [SC 438, 290]; cf. Casiday 2006c, 115)

In his work *De malignis cogitationibus* 40, Evagrius employs the term “imprinting” in a unique way. He explains that during “pure prayer” (προσευχῆς καθαρᾶς), a divine light (φῶς) appears in the intellect and “imprints” (ἐκτυπώ)¹⁰ “the place of God.” (τόπος τοῦ Θεοῦ) (*De malignis cogitationibus* 40.9 [SC 438, 290])¹¹ The use of the verb ἐκτυποῦν here (*De malignis cogitationibus* 40.9)¹² is especially surprising, considering that in the following chapter, τὸ νόημα τοῦ θεοῦ is listed among the “representations” that leave no form in the intellect (*De malignis cogitationibus* 41.27–9 [SC 438, 294]).¹³

In the phrase τὸ νόημα τοῦ Θεοῦ (*De malignis cogitationibus* 41.17 [SC 438, 292]),¹⁴ the term νόημα no longer means a “representation,” but instead signifies the “idea,” “concept,” or “thought” of God—ἡ μνήμη τοῦ Θεοῦ, “the memory of God” (*Capita cū auctoribus discipulis Evagrii* 61.6 [SC 514, 162])¹⁵—as explained in the *Chapters to Evagrius’ Disciples* (cf. Guillaumont 1998, 21–22).

This divine ray restores the true “state of the intellect” (νοῦ καταστάσις), enabling it to self-contemplate, much “like sapphire or sky-blue—which Scripture also calls ‘the place of God,’ seen on Mt Sinai by the elders.” (σαπφείρω ἢ οὐρανίω χρώματι παρεμφερῇ, ἥντινα καὶ τόπον θεοῦ ἡ γραφὴ ὀνομάζει ὑπὸ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ὀφθέντα

¹⁰ The verb ἐκτυπώ (derived from ἔκτυπος) primarily means “worked in high relief.” (Liddell et al. 1996, 524) For another unusual use of the language of “imprinting”: τυπώ = “form by impress,” “form, mould, model” (Liddell et al. 1996, 1835); see *Capita Gnostica* 5.41 (Hanssens 1939, 231): “The one bearing the intelligible cosmos (νοητὸς κόσμος) imprinted (τυπούμενον) in himself ceases from all corruptible desire (ἐπιθυμία φθαρτή); and he is ashamed at those things he first he enjoyed; his thought (λογισμός) frequently reproaches him for his earlier insensibility.” (Young et al. 2024a, 380) Cf. Stewart 2001, 198, n. 118.

¹¹ The final part [from ἐκείνου, line 8: “at the time of prayer which imprints (ἐκτυποῦντος) the place of God (τὸν τόπον τοῦ θεοῦ)”—D.J.] is missing in the parallel text in *Capita cognoscitiva* 23 (Muyldermans 1931, 376).

¹² Which also appears in 25.40 (SC 438, 242): “But, pay attention to yourself (πρόσεχε σεαυτῷ) and see how the intellect (ὁ νοῦς) puts on the form (ἐνδύεται τὴν μορφήν) of its own body without the face, but again imprints (ἐκτυποῖ) the neighbor entirely by means of discursive thinking (κατὰ διάνοιαν), since having grasped beforehand and seen such a one entirely.” (SC 438, 291)

¹³ It is also worth noting that the verb ἐκτυπώ has no correspondent in the parallel Syriac text. Cf. SC 438, 290–291, n. 6.

¹⁴ The expression τὸ νόημα τοῦ θεοῦ—which appears only here and in the *Schol 1 ad Ps* 140.2(1)—may seem strange: the word νόημα takes on the meaning of “notion,” “idea,” or “concept” here rather than that of “representation.” (SC 438, 293, n. 7)

¹⁵ The formula ἡ μνήμη τοῦ Θεοῦ is another way, biblically inspired, of designating the state of prayer. See *Schol 22 ad Ps* 118.55: “for the evil thought (λογισμός), lingering in the reason/discursive thought (τῇ διανοίᾳ), distracts the intellect (τὸν νοῦν) and separates it from the memory of God (τῆς μνήμης τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ).” (SC 514, 162, n. 61) “The memory of God” plays an important role in Evagrian spirituality, as evidenced by *Admonitio paraenetica* 3. This expression stands in opposition to “passion-laden memories” (cf. *Liber practicus* 34.1 [SC 171, 578]): (Ὡν τὰς μνήμας ἔχομεν ἐμπαθεῖς), which include bad thoughts and the distractions arising from people and worldly affairs. Cf. Muyldermans 1952, 87, 126, 157.

ἐπὶ τοῦ ὄρους Σινᾶ) (*De malignis cogitationibus* 39.3–6 [SC 438, 286]; cf. Casiday 2006c, 114) What it perceives possesses brilliance and colour, but lacks form.¹⁶

This “formless light” (Conway-Jones 2018, 271; cf. Guillaumont 1984, 256) through which the intellect perceives itself, is not its own, but the light of God Himself.¹⁷ When it sees itself as light, resembling the sky’s azure, the intellect recognizes its likeness to God. Simultaneously, it perceives and knows—indirectly, as in a mirror—the immaterial, uncreated light that is God (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001a, 519). However, it does not see God Himself in His essence; what it sees is, like those of ancient Israel, the “place of God”—that is, itself clothed in divine light (cf. Guillaumont 1984, 260).

3. The “Place of God” Metaphor

Evagrius’ use of the metaphor “the place of God”¹⁸ has been interpreted by researchers (Guillaumont 1984, 260; Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001a, 520; Stewart 2001, 195) as stemming from his own mystical experiences and reflections on Holy Scripture. Evagrius’s starting point is Exod 24:10, a verse highlighting the differences between the MT and the LXX. According to the MT, Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders “saw the God of Israel” (וַיַּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל). In contrast, the LXX translates the text as follows: “And they saw the place where the God of Israel stood” (καὶ εἶδον τὸν τόπον, οὗ εἰστήκει ὁ Θεὸς τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ). The LXX translators based their interpretation on the MT’s description of God’s feet, under which “there was

¹⁶ See *Capita cognoscitiva* 2 (Muyldermans 1931, 374): καὶ τότε ὄψεται αὐτὸν σαυφείρω ἢ οὐρανίῳ χρώματι παρεμφερῇ—“then he will see the intellect appear similar to sapphire or to the color of the sky” (cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001b, 521); 4 (Muyldermans 1931, 374): Νοῦ κατάστασις ἐστὶν ὕψος νοητὸν οὐρανίῳ χρώματι παρεμφερές—“The state of the intellect is an intelligible height, comparable in colour to the sky.” (cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001b, 521) Cf. also Stewart 2001, 197–98.

¹⁷ Thus, in moments of “pure prayer,” the intellect sees itself because it has become luminous; however, this light that enables it to see itself and perceive its “state” is the divine light that envelops it. This divine light is God Himself, as Evagrius states, adopting the Johannine formula (cf. 1 John 1:5), “God, in his essence, is light.” Cf. *Capita Gnostica* 1.35, S1 (Frankenberg 1912b, 79): “Just as light (φως) itself, while showing everything to us, does not need another light (φωτος) by which to be seen, so also God, although he shows everything, does not need another light (φωτος) by which to be known. For, in his essence (ουσιαι), ‘He is light (φως).’” (Young et al. 2024a, 169)

¹⁸ For the expression “place of God,” cf. *Capita cognoscitiva* 20 (Muyldermans 1931, 376): “Having come to be in prayer, it enters into the formlessness which is called the ‘place of God (τόπος Θεοῦ)’” (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001b, 525); 23 (Muyldermans 1931, 376): “The intellect would not see the ‘place of God’ (τὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ τόπον) in itself...” (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001b, 525); 25 (Muyldermans 1931, 377): “From holy David we have clearly learned what the ‘place of God’ (ὁ τόπος τοῦ Θεοῦ) is” (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001b, 526); and *De oratione* 58 (PG 79, 1180): “Even if the intellect comes to be above the contemplation of bodily nature, it has not yet contemplated the perfect ‘place of God (τὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ τόπον).’” (Casiday 2006b, 192) See also *De malignis cogitationibus* 39, 40 (SC 438, 286–90).

something like of a paved work of sapphire stone, and the like of the very heaven for clearness” (רָגְלָיו, כְּמַעֲשֵׂה לְבִנַּת הַסַּפִּיר, וּכְצֶעֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם, לְטָהָר), transforming it into “and under his feet was as it were a work of sapphire bricks, and as it were the appearance of the firmament of heaven in its purity” (ὥσει ἔργον πλίνθου σαπφείρου καὶ ὥσπερ εἶδος στερεώματος τοῦ οὐρανοῦ τῇ καθαριότητι). The Hebrew word *livnat*, derived from *levenah*, means “brick” and suggests a decorative pavement of bricks or tiles.

Sappir, translated as “sapphire,” does not refer to the modern blue gemstone (corundum), which was unknown in the ancient Near East, but rather to dark blue lapis lazuli, which was often used. In the vision of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 1:26; 10:1), God’s throne is made of this material, and the use of lapis lazuli in a palace is mentioned in Ugaritic literature. In Exod 24:11, the MT replaces the general verb “to see” (רָאָה, *ra’ah*) with the stronger verb “to behold” (הִזָּה, *hāzāh*), a term from the vocabulary of prophetic vision that suggests much greater intensity and emphasizes that the encounter goes beyond natural eye perception (cf. Sarna 1991, 153). The Septuagint, however, employs the passive form (ὤφθησαν) of the verb “to see” (ὁράω): “they appeared/were seen in the place of God” (ὤφθησαν ἐν τῷ τόπῳ τοῦ θεοῦ). Thus, in the LXX, the “place” no longer represents what is seen but rather indicates the location of those who experienced this vision (cf. Conway-Jones 2018, 267–68).

The Alexandrian translators, to soften the claim of a direct vision of God, replaced the Hebrew phrase “they saw the God of Israel” with “they saw the ‘place’ where the God of Israel stood.” This change is supported by the fact that the Hebrew word *māqôm* (מָקוֹם = “place”) also functions as one of the substitutes for the divine name. Therefore, the term “place of God” arises, playing a key role in Evagrius’s interpretation of Exod 24:10, explaining the vision the intellect has of itself “during prayer”: the intellect then perceives itself as the “place of God.” This shift from a direct vision of God to a vision of the “place” where God is present highlights an important theological subtlety, creating a distance between humanity and divinity while acknowledging divine presence at the centre of the spiritual experience (cf. Guillaumont 1984, 258). Evagrius follows the careful translators of the Septuagint in choosing the euphemism, referring to the “place of God” rather than God. “It is a place of visitation rather than a location of essence.” (Stewart 2001, 198)

The image of the sapphire pavement beneath God’s feet, echoed in the theophanies of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 1:26; 10:1), becomes a symbol in Evagrian writings. Evagrius interiorizes this biblical topography, transferring “the place of God” from the geographical space of Sinai into the human intellect (cf. *De malignis cogitationibus* 39 [SC 438, 286–88]; 40 [SC 438, 288–90]; *Capita cognoscitiva* 25 [Muyldermans 1931, 377]), aligned with an exegesis influenced by the Alexandrian tradition. He supports this interpretation linking verses about God’s “place” in Sion¹⁹

¹⁹ For the “place” of God in Sion, cf. Ps 75:3 LXX: “And his place has been in peace, and his dwelling-place in Sion”; cf. *Capita cognoscitiva* 25 (Muyldermans 1931, 376). In *Epistulae* 39.5 (Frankenberg 1912c, 593),

and Jerusalem,²⁰ emphasizing that seeing this “place”²¹ requires going beyond ordinary mental processes and can only be achieved through pure, “imageless prayer.” (cf. Stewart 2001, 196)

Evagrius intentionally combines elements from different scriptural traditions, choosing the “place of God” from the Septuagint (εἶδον τὸν τόπον, οὗ εἰστήκει ἐκεῖ ὁ θεὸς τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ), and the “colour” (χρῶμα) (of heaven) from Symmachus’s translation (cf. Wevers 1990, 385–86, n. 10)—where the elders saw “by a vision [ὁράματι] the God of Israel.” By abandoning the “firmament” (στερέωμα) of the sky, which implies a physical image, he prefers “colour” (χρῶμα) (cf. Guillaumont 1984, 258), which more accurately reflects the inner and contemplative aspects of spiritual experience (cf. Conway-Jones 2018, 268–69).

In *De oratione*, Evagrius equates “the place of God” with “the place of prayer” (τόπος προσευχῆς) (cf. Conway-Jones 2018, 269),²² linking it to the vision of divine light. Inspired by the Sinaitic theophany, Evagrius compares human existence to a life spent at the foot of Mount Sinai, where one stays vigilant over their thoughts while

Evagrius calls this “place” also a “vision of peace” (ὁράσις εἰρήνης), in which “one sees (ὁραὶ τις) in it (ἐν αὐτῷ) that peace which surpasses all understanding and guards our hearts (cf. Phil 4:7). For in a pure heart (καθαρὰ καρδίᾳ) another heaven is formed (ἄλλος οὐρανὸς ἐντυπνύεται), where the vision is light (οὐ ἡ ὁρασις φῶς ἐστὶ) and the place is spiritual (ὁ τοπὸς πνευματικὸς), in which the meanings of beings (αἱ τῶν ὄντων ἐννοιαὶ) are seen (ὁρῶνται).” (cf. Icā Jr. 2022, 275)

²⁰ For the “place” of God in Jerusalem, cf. Ps 134:21 LXX: “Blessed in Sion be the Lord, who dwells in Jerusalem”; Ps 67:30: “Because of thy temple at Jerusalem shall kings bring presents to thee.” For the Evagrian interpretation, see *Scholia* 1, 2 ad Ps 75:3 (PG 12, 1536C): “The practical soul is the place of God (τόπος θεοῦ ψυχῇ πρακτικῇ). The contemplative intellect is the dwelling place of God (Κατοικητήριον θεοῦ νοῦς θεωρητικὸς).” Thus, Ps 75 is read as a commentary on Exod 24. This reading will lead Evagrius to emphasize that the interior Sinai is also an interior Sion. The true “temple” is not in Jerusalem, but in the intellect, cf. *Capita cognoscitiva* 23 (Muyldermans 1931, 376): “The intellect could not not see the place of God within itself” (Οὐκ ἂν ἴδοι ὁ νοῦς τὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ τόπον ἐν ἑαυτῷ). In other words, God’s eternal dwelling place is man; the human person is the true place of divine presence and illumination. Cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001a, 519.

²¹ See *De malignis cogitationibus* 39.2–6 (SC 438, 286): “The intellect (ὁ νοῦς) ... will see its own state (ἑαυτοῦ κατάστασιν) in the time of prayer (κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν τῆς προσευχῆς), resembling sapphire or the colour of heaven (οὐρανίῳ χρώματι); this state scripture (ἡ γραφὴ) calls the place of God (τόπος θεοῦ), that was seen by the elders (ὑπὸ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων) n Mount Sinai [cf. Exod 24:9–11] (ἐπὶ τοῦ ὄρους Σινᾶ).” (cf. Sinkewicz 2003, 180)

²² See *De oratione* 57 (PG 79, 1180): “Even when the intellect (νοῦς) does not abide among the bare representations of things (νοήμασι τῶν πραγμάτων), it has not *ipso facto* attained the place of prayer”; 72 (PG 79, 1181): “It is not possible for one in chains to run, nor is it possible for an intellect (νοῦς) enslaved to the passions to see the place of spiritual prayer (προσευχῆς πνευματικῆς)”; 102 (PG 79, 1189): “In the holy place of prayer (προσεύχον ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ τόπῳ), pray not as the Pharisee, but as the tax collector, so that you too may be justified by God”; 152 (PG 79, 1200): “In proportion as you are paying attention to the body and your intellect (νοῦς) is busy with the Tabernacle’s delights, you have not yet beheld the place of prayer (τὸν τῆς προσευχῆς ἑώρακας τόπον).” Cf. Casiday 2006b, 192, 193, 201. See also *De oratione* 58 (PG 79, 1180), where the term τόπος Θεοῦ (“place of God”) appears in immediate juxtaposition with τόπος προσευχῆς (“place of prayer”) from chapter 57. Cf. Stewart 2001, 197, n. 114.

waiting for the call to ascend (*De malignis cogitationibus* 17.36–9 [SC 438, 212, 214]).²³ Moses serves as the model of the perfect prayerful person who speaks directly with God²⁴ but must first remove his sandals before approaching the Burning Bush (*De oratione* 4 [PG 79, 1168]).²⁵ To see “the place of God” and to speak with God in “the place of prayer” is equivalent to “ascending” beyond all impassioned thoughts²⁶ and any representation,²⁷ including non-sensory ones.²⁸ Therefore, the “place of God” (τόπος Θεοῦ) is the rational soul (ψυχὴ λογική), and His dwelling is the “luminous intellect” (νοῦς φωτοειδής), which has given up worldly desires and has been taught to contemplate “the reasons of the soul.” (τοὺς τῆς ψυχῆς λόγους) (*Capita cognoscitiva* 25 [Muyldermans 1931, 376]; cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001b, 526)

- ²³ “Then once more let us graze the sheep (πρόβατα) on Mount Sinai (Σιναιὸν ὄρος), so that the God of our fathers (θεὸς τῶν πατέρων ἡμῶν) may call us (even us!) from out of the bush (βάτου) and grace us (even us!) (χαρίσῃται) with the reasons of ‘signs’ (σημεῖα) and ‘wonders’ (τέρατα).” (Casiday 2006c, 101)
- ²⁴ See *Epistulae* 27.2 (Frankenberg 1912c, 583): “and ‘he spoke with God face to face’ (πρόσωπον κατὰ πρόσωπον ἐλάλησεν μετὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ; cf. Exod 33:11) and learned the reasons of existing things by sight and not allegorically (ὄψει καὶ οὐκ ἀλληγορικῶς).” (cf. Ică Jr. 2022, 255) According to Bunge, knowledge is a deeply personal act expressing an intimate communion between Creator and creature. Moses is presented as a model of the perfect one, who reached that “face-to-face vision” while still on earth, a vision that St. Paul the Apostle reserves for the eschaton (1 Cor 13:12). Due to his unique gentleness (πραγῶς) more than all people, Moses was granted a direct vision in which God made His ways (τὰς ὁδοὺς αὐτοῦ) known to him (τῷ Μωϋσεῖ) (Ps 102:7; cf. *Epistulae* 56.3 [Frankenberg 1912c, 605]) and he learned the reasons of existing things (λόγους τῶν ὄντων) by sight (ὄψει), unlike the indirect vision “in a mirror dimly” (δι’ ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι) experienced by others (cf. 1 Cor 13:12). Cf. Bunge 2022, 153.
- ²⁵ “If Moses was turned back when he tried to approach the burning bush (βάτω φλεγόμενη) on earth, until he took the sandals off his feet [Exod 3:5—D.J.], how can you—who wish to see the one who is beyond all perception (τὸν ὑπὲρ πάντων αἰσθησιν) and conception (ἐννοίαν) and to be in communion with him—not put off from yourself every impassioned representation (πᾶν νόημα ἐμπαθές)?” (Casiday 2006b, 188)
- ²⁶ See *De malignis cogitationibus* 40.3–4 (SC 438, 288): “unless it had put off the passions (τὰ πάθη)” (Casiday 2006c, 115); *De oratione* 72 (PG 79, 1181): “nor is it possible for an intellect enslaved to the passions (νοῦς πάθει δουλεύων)” (Casiday 2006b, 193); *Capita cognoscitiva* 25 (Muyldermans 1931, 377): “the luminous intellect, which has renounced the pleasures of the world” (νοῦς φωτοειδής τὰς κοσμικὰς ἐπιθυμίας ἀρνησάμενος) (cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001b, 526); *De oratione* 152 (PG 79, 1200): “In proportion as you are paying attention to the body and your intellect is busy with the Tabernacle’s delights.” (Casiday 2006b, 201)
- ²⁷ See *De malignis cogitationibus* 40.4–5 (SC 438, 288): “that bind it to sensible objects (τοῖς πράγμασι τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς) through representations (διὰ τῶν νοημάτων)” (cf. Casiday 2006c, 115); *Capita cognoscitiva* 23 (Muyldermans 1931, 376): “unless it has been raised higher than all the representations of objects (ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν νοημάτων)” (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001b, 525); *De oratione* 57 (PG 79, 1180): “Even when the intellect (ὁ νοῦς) does not abide among the bare representations of things (νοήμασι τῶν πραγμάτων).” (Casiday 2006b, 192)
- ²⁸ See *De oratione* 57 (PG 79, 1180): “for it can still be in contemplation (θεωρία) of things and talk idly about their reasons. Even if they are bare words, insofar as they are contemplations (θεωρήματα) of things, they imprint (τυποῦσι) on and shape (σχηματίζουσι) the intellect (τὸν νοῦν) and place it far from God” (Casiday 2006b, 192); 58 (PG 79, 1180): “Even if the intellect comes to be above the contemplation of bodily nature (ὑπὲρ τὴν θεωρίαν τῆς σωματικῆς φύσεως), it has not yet contemplated the perfect place of God (τὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ τόπον); for it can be among the knowledge of representations (ἐν τῇ τῶν νοητῶν εἶναι γνώσει) and can be diversified by that knowledge (ποικίλλεσθαι πρὸς αὐτήν).” (Casiday 2006b, 192) Cf. Stewart 2001, 197.

4. Impassibility

To achieve contemplation, liberation from passions and the attainment of what Evagrius, using a Stoic term (cf. Guillaumont 1972, 36),²⁹ calls ἀπάθεια³⁰ (“impassibility”³¹), are necessary. Impassibility does not mean apathy or a lack of emotions but signifies “a tranquil state (κατάστασις ἡρεμέα) of the rational soul (ψυχῆς λογικῆς), resulting from gentleness (πραΰτης) and self-control (σωφροσύνη).” (*Capita cognoscitiva* 3 [Muyldermans 1931, 374]; cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001b, 521)

Evagrius identifies two levels of impassibility: “imperfect impassibility” (or “little impassibility”—ὀλίγης ἀπαθείας) (*De malignis cogitationibus* 15.2 [SC 438, 202]) and “perfect impassibility.” (Ἡ μὲν τελεία ἀπάθεια) (*Liber practicus* 60.6 [SC 171, 640]) The ascetic reaches the first level by overcoming the passions of the appetitive part. From there, he develops greater impassibility by restraining the impulses of the irascible part.³² Perfect impassibility is only achieved after fully mastering these latter passions. The latter is proper to angels and remains, for man, a supreme limit toward which he ceaselessly strives (Guillaumont 1972, 42–43). Therefore, impassibility restores the natural order of the soul and returns each part to its proper function.³³

²⁹ Richard Sorabji argues that the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo (ca. 20 BC–50 AD) was the first to philosophically engage with Stoic thought in his writings. These writings, in turn, became the primary source of Stoic influence on the spiritual theology of the Early Church Fathers (cf. Sorabji 2010, 343). The Fathers generally defined ἀπάθεια as the soul’s freedom from passions, a perspective closely mirroring that of the Stoics. Cf. Nguyen 2018, 8.

³⁰ According to Guillaumonts, Clement of Alexandria is, in reality, Evagrius’ predecessor and master on this point. Clement was the pioneer who proposed ἀπάθεια as an ideal for the Christian ascetic, thus bringing the Stoic notion into Christianity. Crucially, impassibility occupies an entirely analogous place in both Clement’s ascetic ideal and Evagrius’ system, possessing the same fundamental connections (cf. SC 170, 101–2). In contrast to Clement and the Stoic philosophers, Evagrius does not regard ἀπάθεια as an absolute state. Consequently, Evagrius’ ἀπάθεια begins within terrestrial life and involves numerous stations or grades. This path’s perspective tends towards other-worldly happiness, with its grades being more detailed than those described in Clement’s *Stromateis*. Cf. Somos 1999, 372.

³¹ Evagrius argues, in *Capita cognoscitiva* 2 (Muyldermans 1931, 374), that the intellect cannot contemplate its own state (τὴν τοῦ νοῦ κατάστασιν) unless it is “free from passions”: “But to do that without being passionless is impossible (τοῦτο δὲ ποιῆσαι ἄνευ ἀπαθείας, τῶν ἀδυνάτων ἐστίν).” (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001b, 521) It is a “state” of perfect simplicity that Evagrius calls “pure prayer” (καθαρά προσευχή), cf. *De malignis cogitationibus* 43.1 (SC 438, 298); *De oratione* 97 (PG 79, 1188–89). In *Capita cognoscitiva* 25 (Muyldermans 1931, 376), he associates this “state” with luminosity, referring to the “luminous intellect” (νοῦς φωτεινός). Cf. Conway-Jones 2018, 269.

³² Impassibility, an expression of the soul’s health, is established gradually within it. The first passions to yield are those related to the appetitive part; in contrast, those from the irascible part are much more difficult and require a long time to be healed, cf. *Liber practicus* 36 (SC 171, 582). On the thoughts (λογισμοί) of the concupiscible and irascible parts of the soul, see Misiarczyk 2021, 127–219.

³³ Once ἀπάθεια is achieved, the soul regains, along with health, its natural functioning across its various parts. In each of these, the virtues proper to it are established: in the rational part—prudence (φρόνησις), understanding (σύνεσις), and wisdom (σοφία); in the concupiscible part (ἐπιθυμητικῷ)—self-control (ἐγκράτεια), love (ἀγάπη), and abstinence (σωφροσύνη); in the irascible part (θυμικῷ)—courage (ἀνδρεία) and perseverance (*Liber practicus* 89 [SC 171, 680 sq.]). Cf. Guillaumont 1972, 41–42.

Reaching impassibility does not mean that the continuous flow of thoughts stops, but only that they lose their ability to undermine self-control.³⁴ Thus, the ascetic lives in a tranquil state of balance during the waking hours: “the ascetical intellect (πρακτικός) is one that always receives passionlessly (ἀπαθῶς) the representations (νοήματα) of this world.” (*Capita cognoscitiva* 16 [Muyldermans 1931, 375]; cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001b, 523) However, impassibility can also extend to the unconscious realm, including experiences during sleep: “The proof of ἀπάθεια is that the νοῦς has begun to see its own light, remaining tranquil in the presence of apparitions (φάσματα) during sleep, and regarding objects (πράγματα) calmly.” (*Liber practicus* 64 [SC 171, 648]; cf. Young et al. 2024c, 77)

For Evagrius, being passionless signifies spiritual progress, but it does not guarantee holiness. He was aware that, although monks faced the risk of falling, they could achieve a genuine state of inner peace and tranquillity through extended ascetic efforts (cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001a, 515–17).

However, impassibility, while representing the ultimate goal of the ascetic life (πρακτική),³⁵ does not constitute an end pursued for its own sake; it is sought only because it signifies the condition for a higher purpose: contemplation (θεωρία)³⁶.

5. The Vision of the Divine Light

In the *Gnosticus* 45, Evagrius states that those who have attained ἀπάθεια “are able to contemplate (θεωρέω) the light or splendour (φέγγος) (Liddell et al. 1996, 1920)

³⁴ Through the practice of discernment (διάκρισις), the ascetic (or πρακτικός) learns to use two parts of the soul—the concupiscible (ἐπιθυμητικόν) and the irascible (θυμικόν)—in a useful and natural way. These two faculties of the soul are meant to support the rational part, λογιστικόν, cf. *De malignis cogitationibus* 17 (SC 438, 101). When the two “assistants” (θυμικόν and ἐπιθυμητικόν) are misused—that is, when they engage in behaviours that separate them from or oppose λογιστικόν—they overwhelm the soul with passions. Cf. Prassas 2022, 279.

³⁵ For the monk striving to perceive God’s presence and divine light, merely practicing ἀναχώρησις—withdrawing into the desert and severing ties with people and material objects—is insufficient (cf. Misiarczyk 2023, 266–67). Exterior stillness, called ἡσυχία, does not automatically guarantee the interior stillness of ἀπάθεια—the latter being much more difficult to obtain. Between the two is what Evagrius calls πρακτική, a concept he defines (cf. *Liber practicus* 78) as the “spiritual method clearing out the passionate part of the soul.” (Πρακτική ἐστὶ μέθοδος πνευματικὴ τὸ παθητικὸν μέρος τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκκαθαίρουσα) (SC 171, 666; cf. Young et al. 2024c, 84) This involves the acquisition of ἡσυχία and aims ultimately at ἀπάθεια. Cf. Guillaumont 1972, 35–36.

³⁶ In Evagrius Ponticus’ view, ἀπάθεια is intrinsically linked to knowledge and contemplation. This state facilitates undisturbed prayer, leading to contemplation of the Trinity and “formless union” with God. Imperfect ἀπάθεια, furthermore, offers knowledge of created things, an essential tool in the struggle against the demons. However, perfect ἀπάθεια and undisturbed prayer are not the ultimate aims. The true goal is love, deemed the “daughter of ἀπάθεια.” Cf. Bøcher Rasmussen 2005, 147–62.

proper to the intellect (νοῦς) shining upon them during prayer.” (*Fragmentum ex libro Gnosticus inscripto* 45.6–8 [SC 356, 178]; cf. Evagrius of Pontus 2024, 138) Similarly, in the *Liber practicus* 64, he shows that “a sign of ἀπάθεια is the νοῦς beginning to see its own light or splendour (οἰκεῖον φέγγος).” (*Liber practicus* 64.1–3 [SC 171, 648]; cf. Young et al. 2024b, 77)

In other writings, Evagrius emphasizes that this light (φέγγος³⁷) has a divine origin, linked to the Holy Trinity or the Savior.³⁸ Generally, Evagrius describes the knowledge of God as light,³⁹ believing that the intellect, created to know God,⁴⁰ is meant to become like light, “shining like a star.” (νοῦν ἀστεροειδῆ ὄψει) (*De malignis cogitationibus* 43.7 [SC 438, 298]; cf. Stewart 2001, 193–94)

³⁷ The term φέγγος is also used in *Tractatus ad Eulogium* 29.37 (SC 591, 392–93): “and for the light of prayer to shine forth (καὶ ἐλλαμφοῦναι τῆς εὐχῆς τὸ φέγγος).” Other texts employ the more common term for light, φῶς. It is possible that Evagrius’s choice to use the term φέγγος was inspired, at least in part, by the theophany appearances in the Book of the prophet Ezekiel; cf. Ezek 1:4 (καὶ φέγγος ἐν αὐτῷ = “and brightness in it”); 1:13 (καὶ φέγγος τοῦ πυρός = “and the brightness of fire”); 27 (καὶ τὸ φέγγος αὐτοῦ κύκλῳ = “and the brightness thereof round about”); 1:28 (ἡ στάσις τοῦ φέγγους κυκλόθεν = “form of brightness round about”); 10:4 (τοῦ φέγγους τῆς δόξης Κυρίου = “the brightness of the glory of the Lord”). Cf. Stewart 2001, 193, n. 93.

³⁸ See *De malignis cogitationibus* 15.14–5 (SC 438, 204): “again, being elevated by prayer (κατὰ τὴν προσευχὴν), we may see (ἐποπτεύομεν) the clearer light (τὸ ... φῶς) of Our Saviour (τοῦ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν).” (Casiday 2006c, 100) Light, as a reflection of God’s face, cf. *Schol 6 ad Ps* 4.7 (Pitra 1884, 453–54): “men see the light of His face” (οἱ δὲ ἀνθρώποι τὸ φῶς τοῦ προσώπου αὐτοῦ).

³⁹ “Light” is a symbol of God and His knowledge, and the intellect (νοῦς) is receptive by its nature, cf. *Capita Gnostica* 1.74, S1 (PO 28, 52); (Frankenberg 1912b, 113): “The light of the intellect (τὸ τοῦ νοῦς φῶς) is divided (διακρίνεται/μερίζεται) into three: into the knowledge of the Holy and adored Trinity (τὴν γνῶσιν τῆς ἁγίας καὶ προσκυνητῆς Τριάδος); nature (φύσις) incorporeal (ἀσώματον) and corporeal (ἐνσώματον); and the understanding of the natures of created things (καὶ εἰς τὴν συνεσιν τῶν φύσεων τῶν κτισμάτων)” (PO 28, 52); 1.81 (Hausherr 1939, 230): “The glory and light of the intellect (Δόξα οὖν καὶ φῶς τοῦ νοῦς), then, is knowledge (ἡ γνῶσις), but the glory and light of life (δόξα δὲ καὶ φῶς ζωῆς) is impassibility” (Young et al. 2024a, 200); *Epistulae* 28.1 (Frankenberg 1912c, 585): “And ‘lamp’ (λαμπαδα) here I call the intellect (τὸν νοῦν) made (πεποιημένον) to grasp (καταλαβεῖν) the blessed light (τὸ μακάριον φῶς)” (Icā Jr. 2022, 257); 30.1 (Frankenberg 1912c, 587): “Sleep of the rational nature (ὑπνόν τῆς λογικῆς φύσεως) he calls sin by deed (τὴν δι’ ἔργου ἁμαρτίαν), because it deprives (ἀποστεροῦσαν) the soul (τὴν ψυχὴν) of the holy light (τοῦ ἁγίου φωτός).” (Icā Jr. 2022, 261) See also *Schol 2 ad Ps* 12.4 (PG 12, 1204B): “Illumine yourselves with the light of knowledge” (Φωτίσατε ἑαυτοὺς φῶς γνώσεως); *Schol 3 ad Ps* 33.6 (PG 12, 1308B): “Draw near to Him and be enlightened” (προσέλθατε πρὸς αὐτὸν καὶ φωτίσθητε); *Schol 3 ad Ps* 36.6 (Pitra 1883, 10): “The light of righteousness is knowledge” (Φῶς δικαιοσύνης γνῶσις); *Schol 7 ad Ps* 37.11 (Pitra 1883, 23): “The light of the eyes is contemplation” (Τὸ φῶς τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν ἐστὶν ἡ θεωρία); and *Schol 79 ad Prov* 6.20 (SC 340, 180): “The light, which is the very knowledge of God.” (τὸ φῶς, ὅπερ ἐστὶ ἡ γνῶσις αὐτοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ) (SC 340, 181)

⁴⁰ Even though the intellect, in its quality as the image of God, is oriented by creation towards its Prototype, nonetheless, “it is not the intellect (νοῦς) [as such—D.J.] that sees God, but the *pure intellect* (καθαρὸς νοῦς). ... For purity (καθαρότης) is the impassibility of the rational soul (ἀπάθεια λογικῆς ψυχῆς), but the vision of God (ὄψις Θεοῦ) is the true knowledge (ἀληθινὴ ἐπίγνωσις) of the one essence (μίας οὐσίας) of the adorable Trinity, which is seen by those who have perfected their way of life here and have purified their soul (ψυχὴν καθάρισαντες) through commandments.” (*Epistulae* 56.2 [Frankenberg 1912c, 605]) Cf. Bunge 2022, 153–54.

Evagrius was not the only early monk to describe experiencing light during prayer. He explains how he traveled with Ammonius,⁴¹ one of the Origenist “Tall Brothers” from Nitria, to meet John of Lycopolis, “the Seer of the Thebaid,” in Middle Egypt,⁴² to ask whether “the inner light of the νοῦς,” seen during prayer, is a reflection of divine light or if it comes from the inherent brightness of the intellect itself.⁴³ John tells them that the question goes beyond human knowledge⁴⁴ and that “the intellect cannot be illuminated, in prayer, without the grace of God.”⁴⁵

In *Capita cognoscitiva* 2, Evagrius states that anyone wishing to contemplate the “state” (κατάστασις) of his intellect (νοῦς) will need God’s help (χρεία Θεοῦ), which breathes into him (τοῦ ἀναπνέοντος αὐτῷ) the “kindred light” (συγγενὲς φῶς)⁴⁶ (*Capita cognoscitiva* 2 [Muyldermans 1931, 374]; cf. Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001b, 521). The light of the intellect is “kindred” to the light of the Holy Trinity;⁴⁷ however, God is the one who initiates the illumination, and although “kindred,” the two lights are distinct (cf. Tobon 2011, 51).⁴⁸ Thus, “the light of God, like the

⁴¹ About Ammonius, Evagrius said: “I have never seen a man more passionless (ἀπαθέστερον) than him.” (Palladius Helenopolitanus, *Historia Lausiaca* 11; 1034B.11–2 [Butler 1904, 34])

⁴² The journey from Kellia, in Lower Egypt—where Evagrius and Ammonius lived—to Lycopolis (present-day Asyut), the city where the philosopher Plotinus was born a century earlier, was a long one. In *Historia Lausiaca* 35 (Butler 1904, 101), Palladius, who lived alongside Evagrius in Kellia for several years, recounts that he made this journey, which took him eighteen days, sometimes walking and sometimes traveling by boat on the Nile. “It must have been a question of great importance to Evagrius if he undertook such a pilgrimage!” (Guillaumont 1984, 256)

⁴³ Upon reaching John, Evagrius asked him if the light he saw originated from the very nature of the intellect (νοῦς) and emanated from it, or if it was something external that appeared and illuminated it. Cf. *Antirrhetikos* 6.16 (Frankenberg 1912a, 525): “whether it is the nature of the intellect (νοῦς φύσις) to be luminous (φωτεινὴ) and thus it pours forth the light from itself (τὸ φῶς ἐξ αὐτοῦ ἐκδιδῶσιν) or whether it [the light—D.J.] (τὸ φῶς) appears from something else outside (ἐκτοθεν) and illumines it [the intellect—D.J.] (αὐτὸν φωτίζον).” (Brakke 2009, 137) Cf. Guillaumont 1984, 256.

⁴⁴ John, likely practicing *synkatabasis* and *epikripsis* did not provide a clear or definitive answer to the question, preferring not to commit to a firm conclusion, cf. Young et al. 2024a, 196.

⁴⁵ See *Antirrhetikos* 6.16 (Frankenberg 1912a, 525): “No human being is able to explain this, and indeed, apart from the grace of God (θεοῦ χάριτος), the intellect (νοῦς) cannot be illumined (φωτισθῆναι) in prayer (ἐν τῇ προσευχῇ) by being set free (ἀπελευθερωθεῖς) from the many cruel enemies (πολλῶν καὶ δεινῶν ἐχθρῶν) that are endeavoring to destroy it (εἰς τὴν ἀπωλείαν αὐτοῦ σπενδοντων).” (Brakke 2009, 137) Cf. Stewart 2001, 193–94.

⁴⁶ With whom is this light “kindred,” A. Guillaumont asks: with the intellect or with God? “Evidently, it is the divine light, poured out upon the intellect.” (Guillaumont 1984, 258)

⁴⁷ If “the intellect (νοῦς) is a temple (ναός) of the Holy Trinity,” cf. *Capita cognoscitiva* 34 (Muyldermans 1931, 377), then the Trinity illuminates the intellect through its presence. The light originating from the Holy Trinity, illuminating the intellect, becomes the “common property of God and the creature.” (Casiday 2013, 183)

⁴⁸ See *Liber practicus* 64 (SC 171, 648): “an indication of impassibility is that the intellect begins to see its own light (τὸ οἰκεῖον φέγγος).” The stripping away of corporeality by the intellect is a return to its true nature, becoming more aware of its own light in the process. See also *Chapters to Evagrius’s Disciples* 78 (SC 514, 174): “When the intellect progresses in πρακτικῇ, the representations it has of sensible things are light; when it progresses in γνῶσις, the contemplations it will have will be varied; when it progresses in prayer, it will see its own light (τὸ ἴδιον φῶς) becoming brighter and more luminous.” Besides having its

sun, ignites the light of the intellect, just as a mountaintop shines in the sun's rays." (Harmless and Fitzgerald 2001a, 518)

The frequency with which Evagrius mentions the "light" during prayer shows that this kind of spiritual experience was valued by him. However, he also recognized the risk associated with it.⁴⁹ In *De oratione*, Evagrius points out that demons might manipulate the brain to produce an illusion of light,⁵⁰ which can easily be mistaken for the glory of God or "the place" of divine knowledge.⁵¹ Therefore, angelic intervention is needed to restore the proper functioning of the light of the intellect.⁵²

In early Christian writings, veiled references to theophanic experiences involving light are common. However, Evagrius stands out as one of the few authors to describe them directly.⁵³ The ascetic texts related to Egyptian monasticism in the 4th century⁵⁴ reflect Evagrius's connection to this cultural setting; yet, their notable

own light, Evagrius concludes that the intellect can also be illuminated from without. See *Capita cognoscitiva* 2 (Muyldermans 1931, 374). Cf. Tobon 2011, 230, 52.

⁴⁹ In *Historia Lausiaca* 73.1–5 (Syriac version), Palladius recounts the story of the monk Eucarpios, who lived in isolation for eighteen years, renouncing communion with the brethren, avoiding the Eucharist, and dedicating himself exclusively to prayer. Due to pride, he came to believe he had attained perfection. One night, Satan appeared to him in the guise of an angel of light, claiming to be Christ and convincing him that he must leave Sketis and introduce monastic reforms. These reforms involved abandoning Scripture, Psalms, and fasting in favour of "superior" forms of prayer. Following these instructions, Eucarpios fell into delusion, and when he bowed down to the false Christ, he lost his judgment, and his mind was disturbed. Cf. Draguet 1978, 239–41.

⁵⁰ Regarding the manipulation of light around the intellect, see *De oratione* 74 (PG 79, 1184): "I think that the demon (δαίμονα), by touching the place just mentioned (εἰρημένον τόπου), manipulates the light (φῶς) around the intellect (τὸ περὶ τὸν νοῦν) as he wishes (καθὼς βούλεται) ... and through the brain (διὰ τοῦ ἐγκεφάλου) changes (ἀλλοιοῦντος) the light that is joined to it (τὸ συνεζευγμένον φῶς), and gives it a form (μορφοῦντος αὐτὸν)" (cf. Casiday 2006b, 194); *Capita Gnostica* 6.87, S2 (PO 28, 255): "The intellect, according to Solomon's word, is united with the heart; and the light that appears to it is considered to come from the sensory head." Regarding light as a biblical symbol of rational nature, see *Schol 2 ad Ps* 148.3 (PG 12, 1677D): "Light (Τὸ φῶς) now symbolically (συμβολικῶς) signifies a rational nature (λογικὴν φύσιν)."

⁵¹ See *De oratione* 73 (PG 79, 1184): "When at length the intellect (ὁ νοῦς) is praying purely and imperturbably (καθαρῶς λοιπὸν καὶ ἀπαθῶς), then the demons (οἱ δαίμονες) ... suggest to it (ὑποτίθενται) the glory of God (δόξαν θεοῦ) and some shape familiar from perception (σχηματισμὸν τινα τῶν τῇ αἰσθήσει φίλων), so that it would seem (ὡς δοκεῖν) to have attained the perfection (τέλεον τετεῦχθαι) of its goal with respect to prayer (τοῦ περὶ προσευχῆς σκοποῦ). This happens (γίνεσθαι) because ... the demon (τοῦ δαίμονος) who, having attached himself to the area around the brain (τοῦ κατὰ τὸν ἐγκέφαλον τόπου), plucks the veins (ἐν ταῖς φλεψὶ πάλλοντος)." (Casiday 2006b, 194)

⁵² See *De oratione* 75 (PG 79, 1184): "God's angel, when he is present, stops with a single word all the opposing activity for us and sets in motion the light of the intellect (τὸ φῶς τοῦ νοῦ) to work unwaveringly." (Casiday 2006b, 194) Regarding authentic and false experiences in prayer, see *De oratione* 67–76 (1181B–1184C). Cf. Stewart 2001, 194.

⁵³ The oldest account of a vision of light, prior to Evagrius, appears to be that of St. Paul the Apostle regarding his conversion, found in Acts 9:3: "When Saul had almost reached Damascus, a bright light (φῶς) from heaven suddenly flashed around him."

⁵⁴ For example, the *Epistulae Sancti Antonii* (ca. 251–356 AD) (Rubenson 1995), *Vita Antonii* (Gregg 1980), the writings of St. Pachomius (ca. 290–348 AD) (*Pachomiana* [Veilleux 1980; 1981]), and the collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (4th and 5th centuries AD) (Wortley et al. 2019).

lack of descriptions of states of grace sets them apart. This pattern continues in later writings: although some draw on Evagrian themes,⁵⁵ none include detailed accounts of luminous visions,⁵⁶ making Evagrius an exception in Christian literature of that period (cf. Konstantinovsky 2009, 77–78).

Conclusion

This article examined key aspects of Evagrius Ponticus’s spirituality, focusing on his concept of “the place of God” and the vision of “formless light.” Evagrius states that God, being immaterial and formless, can only be known by an intellect that has also achieved formlessness, especially during “imageless prayer.” The “place of God” symbolizes the highest potential of the intellect for divine contemplation, a state reached through strict ascetic practices that lead to impassibility.

In Evagrius’s teachings, the divine light is a crucial experiential phenomenon linked to a purified intellect. It is seen not just as the light of the intellect but also as sharing in divine illumination—a “kindred light” from God. This vision represents the peak of the contemplative journey. Evagrius’s openness in describing these luminous experiences, despite recognizing the risks of delusion, highlights the deeply personal and experiential nature of spiritual ascent.

In conclusion, Evagrius’s comprehensive approach guides the intellect toward inner transformation, aiming to restore it to its true, formless state. In this state of divine grace, the intellect becomes the receptive “place” for the formless God and experiences His presence. As a result, this journey ends in union with the divine, embodying the ultimate goal and core of Evagrian monastic spirituality.

⁵⁵ For example, the *Conlationes* of St. John Cassian (360–435 AD) (CSEL 13; Luibheid 1985), the *Historia Lausiaca* of Palladius (Butler 1904), the correspondence between Barsanuphius and John of Gaza (6th century AD) (*Epistulae Barsanuphii et Ioannis Gazae* [Chrysavgis 2006]), and the *Scala Paradisi* of John Climacus (ca. 579–ca. 650 AD) (Ioannes Climacus [PG 88, 631–1154]; Luibheid and Russell 1982). Some of these works contain Evagrian reminiscences. Thus, *Liber practicus* 5 and 6 are found in the *Scala Paradisi* of St. John Climacus Ioannes Climacus [PG 88, 744b; 872b–c]). Additionally, *Liber practicus* 6 appears in the *Conlationes* (5.2; CSEL 13, 122) of St. John Cassian and in *De virtutibus et vitiis* of St. John Damascene (Ioannes Damascenus, PG 94, 92c–93a).

⁵⁶ Another important figure of light mysticism, who was a contemporary of Evagrius, is the author of the *Macarian Homilies* (*Homiliae spirituales quinquaginta*, Maloney 1992), whose writings are rich with references to visions of light. See Bitton-Ashkelony 2013, 99–128. Although comparisons have been made between the spiritualities of the two authors, the aspect of the theology of light in Evagrius has not been thoroughly analysed in relation to the Macarian tradition. See Horyacha 2013, 113–47; Golitzin 2002, 129–56.

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