

A time to read and a time to embody (Part I) (Emma Cazabonne)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



A time to read and a time to embody:[i]

John's creative use of Scripture in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*

According to Bishop Kallistos, “with the exception of the Bible and the service books, there is no work in Eastern Christianity that has been studied, copied and translated more often than *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by Saint John Climacus”. [ii] However, the number of published monographs on *The Ladder*, at least outside the Greek language, is relatively small.



John's fundamental source is Holy Scripture. A first reading of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* reveals the omnipresence of the Word, as well as John's original use of it. Surprisingly, even fewer studies have been dedicated to that specific topic. [iii] John Chryssavgis, in his recent work on *The Ladder* [iv] deals with the subject only in a very short paragraph of seven lines. John Duffy, in his lecture [v] on the same work,

focuses on comparisons between John Climacus's style and the style of the *kontakion*, but he never mentions how it is also colored by the use of Scripture.

In this article, I attempt to begin filling this significant gap in the studies regarding John Climacus. I will first survey the range of biblical quotations and allusions in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. I will then identify characteristics in John's use of Scripture and present relevant examples for the most original of them. These in turn will allow me to propose reasons for John's creative use of Scripture.

1. SURVEY OF BIBLICAL ALLUSIONS AND QUOTATIONS[vi]

The first time I read the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, I was amazed at John's very large use of Scripture as well as at the freedom with which he used it. The more I read it, the more I discover his boldness.

The 30 degrees of the book contain at least 365 quotations, with a clear increase in the use of Scripture beginning in the 22nd degree. I will try to propose reasons for this progression in the last part of my paper.

The abbot of the monastery of Raithu requested John, *hegoumenos* of Saint Catherine's monastery, to put together a spiritual guide for the members of his community. As John addresses a community of monks, engaged in daily prayer with psalms, it is not surprising that the Book of Psalms is the biblical book most used, with over 118 quotations. John gives the example of Saint Menas, who once asked to remain prostrated before his abbot, spent all that time reciting by heart the whole Psalter.[vii]

The Gospels come in second, with about 100 quotations, 50% excerpted from the Gospel of Matthew.

Many other biblical books are used, about 40 of them, with roughly a balanced use between the Old Testament and the New Testament, that is, about 185 quotations from each. John had two main Old Testament metaphors in mind when he composed his work: Jacob's ladder and Moses' journey. He organized his work in thirty degrees of a ladder, following Jacob's dream in Gn 28. We thus naturally find several references to Jacob all along the book. As for Moses, he is presented as the type of the genuine teacher and pastor. I will come back to it in the last part of my paper.

2. MAIN CHARACTERISTICS IN JOHN'S USE OF SCRIPTURE

According to most scholars, John complied with the request to write this work at the beginning of the 7th century, when he was already advanced in age.[viii] As a

monk, he thus had become very familiar with Scripture, through liturgical services and through his personal reading of the Bible and of the Fathers. He knows it and is very capable of quoting it literally, or referring to it, while using it in a context similar to the original one. He quotes for instance: "I said, I will confess mine iniquities before the Lord against myself. And Thou forgavest the ungodliness of my heart,"[ix] in a scene about repentance and confession of sins.

An element reveals further his familiarity with Scripture: the chain, that is, the connection John makes between several citations in a same paragraph, sometimes up to nine in a row. Step 5, with the famous conversation in *The Prison*, contains a few chains in itself. #22 stages a meeting of monks around one of them preparing "to precede them by finishing his course." They question him about his inner dispositions, mainly phrasing their interrogations through diverse biblical quotes.

Has any inner voice said: Behold thou art made whole, or: Thy sins are forgiven thee, or: Thy faith hath saved thee? Or, have you heard a voice like this: "Let the sinners be turned away into Hades," and: "Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness," and again: "Let the ungodly be taken away that he see not the glory of the Lord?"[x]

John does not need to have recourse to "creative imagination"[xi] with far-fetched arguments. Quoting a conversation he did witness, or recreating the exchange himself, his most convincing tool is to put the words of Scripture in the mouths of the monks.

Step 5 has several other similar biblical chains,[xii] each quotation being connected to the other through a common context, here concerning the fate of a sinner at the time of meeting his Lord and Savior.

John uses also chains with another technique, by means of one key word common to two or more citations. Step 24.23 illustrates this point, with the key word *uprightness*:

God is called love, and also uprightness. That is why the wise man in the Song of Songs says to the pure of heart: Uprightness hath loved thee. Also, the father of the wise man says: Good and upright is the Lord. And of those who are His namesakes, He says that they are saved: Who saveth them who are upright of heart; and again: His countenance sees and visits those who are honest and just.[xiii]

Very early on among Christians, some kinds of biblical concordances were compiled. Would John have been able to use one? Seeing how he is able to chain

together quotations, not only through key words, but also through contexts, would this not reveal his faithful rumination of Scripture rather than the use of a tool? John believes that there is but one possible means of understanding Scripture: union with God. He writes: “He who has perfectly united his senses to God is mystically led by Him to an understanding of His words. But without this union it is difficult to speak about God.”[xiv]

Combining both the use of chains and key words, John’s style is sometimes comparable to the one of the great rabbis and Fathers of the Church who were skilful at explaining Scripture by Scripture. Step 23 has a passage on faith, combining quotations, reflections, and finally showing how the repentant thief illustrates an assertion from the letter to the Hebrews:

Faith is the wing of prayer; without it, my prayer will return again to my bosom. Faith is the unshaken firmness of the soul, unmoved by any adversity. A believer is not one who thinks that God can do everything, but one who believes that he will obtain all things. Faith is the agent of things un hoped for; and the thief proved this.[xv]

Strikingly, John says “things un hoped for”, whereas the biblical text reads: “things hoped for”. Could he be quoting from memory and making a mistake, or rather, is this revealing the freedom with which he addresses Scripture?

His knowledge and familiarity with Scripture is further revealed when he does quote literally a passage or a verse, applying it however to a context different than the one apparently intended by the inspired author. Scripture has become his world of reference, his standard of thinking, the book his mind goes back to, to illustrate his point, to give weight to his argument, sometimes even with irony perhaps, as next example shows. One may be surprised by his boldness in doing so. Step 2.12 was one of those surprises for me:

If young people who are prone to the desires of physical love and to luxurious ways wish to enter the monastic life, let them exercise themselves in all sobriety and prayer, and persuade themselves to abstain from all luxury and guile, lest their last state be worse than the first.[xvi]

To encourage the candidates to monastic life to engage seriously in *askesis*, John does not hesitate to allude to the case of the possessed man. Using perhaps irony, John highlights indeed the seriousness of the matter.

Another interesting instance uses the Paschal episode of the disciples John and Peter running to the empty tomb. Again, the scene is now set by John in a

particular context, an ascetical one, with the practices of obedience and repentance: “Once John outran Peter, and now obedience precedes repentance. For the one who came first is a figure of obedience, and the other of repentance.”[xvii]

[i] The title was inspired by *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 26.87, p.174, where John Climacus applies the Ecclesiastes’s words to “our holy life”.

[ii] John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982) 1.

[iii] Michel Van Parys, a monk of Chevetogne, gave a talk in French on the subject in Bose, Italy in 2001, during the 9th international ecumenical meeting dedicated to John Climacus. “L’interprétation des Écritures Saintes dans *l’Échelle* de saint Jean Climaque”, *Irénikon* 74 (2001) 515-537.

[iv] John Chryssavgis, *John Climacus: From the Egyptian Desert to the Sinaite Mountain* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2004) 233.

[v] John Duffy, “Embellishing the Steps: Elements of Presentation and Style in *The Heavenly Ladder* of John Climacus”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, No. 53 (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1999).

[vi] My survey is mostly done on Archimandrite Lazarus Moore’s translation of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, with the footnotes as presented in the revised edition published by Holy Transfiguration Monastery. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2001).

[vii] 4.34 p.34.

[viii] See Duffy p.2, and G.Couilleau, “Jean Climaque”, in *DSp* 8:369-89.

[ix] 4.12 p.25, quoting Ps 31:5.

[x] 5.22 p.60, quoting: Jn 5:14; Mt 9:2; Mk 5:34; Ps 9:17; Mt 22:13; Is 26:10.

[xi] I was surprised to read in John Duffy’s study: “Those instances will have shown that one is dealing with a style of ordering that is not internally generated and based on doctrine, but is rather externally imposed and inspired by creative imagination.”

[xii] Another impressive one can be found in a discourse on discernment in 26.79

p.173.

[xiii] 24.23 p.147, quoting Sg 1:4; Ps 24:8; Ps 7:11; Ps 10:8.

[xiv] 30.21 p.227.

[xv] 27.68 p.208, quoting Heb 11:1.

[xvi] 2.12 p.14, alluding to Mt12:45.

[xvii] 5.1 p.54, referring to Jn 20:4.