Revisiting the ‘Sudden’: 
Epistle III in the Corpus Dionysiacum

Alexander GOLITZIN, Milwaukee

I should like to begin my remarks in rather an odd place, a scholion of John of Scythopolis on the Mystical Theology of Dionysius, chapter I, paragraph 3. John makes the curious and at first blush harmlessly erudite observation that the darkness, γνώφος, into which Moses disappears in the Greek of Exodus 20.21 is translating the Hebrew term, araphel, and then adds: ‘The Hebrew says that araphel is the name of the firmament into which Moses went, for [the Jews] speak of seven firmaments, which they also call heavens’\(^1\). This is a reference to the ancient tradition that Moses went up at Sinai to the throne of God in the highest heaven, which the rabbis of the Talmudic era called, more accurately but still relatedly, Arabor\(^2\). Moses ascended, in short, to the throne of the divine Glory, to the light of the Shekinah. That the latter, the παρουσία [presence of God] in His most holy places\(^3\), to quote from Mystical Theology I.3\(^3\), signifies for Dionysius both light and Christ, is made

\(^1\) PG 4, 421C, commenting on the γνώφος of Mystical Theology I.3, PG 3, 1001A; for the critical text of the latter, see Corpus Dionysiacum II, ed. G. Heil and A. M. Ritter (Berlin/NY, 1991) 144-10. I shall henceforth refer to Heil and Ritter’s text, which includes the Celestial and Ecclesiastical Hierarchy (CH and EH), the Mystical Theology (MT), and the Epistles, simply in parentheses with page and line numbers. The same will hold for my references to B. M. Suchla’s critical text of the Divine Names (DN) in Corpus Dionysiacum I (Berlin/NY, 1990). For the English of John’s scholion, I am indebted to the translation — with slight amendments — of P. E. Rorem and J. C. Lamoreaux in their very important book, John of Scythopolis and the Dionysian Corpus: Annotating the Areopagite (Oxford, 1998) 244-245.

\(^2\) On the antiquity of Moses’ ascent to heaven, see for example W. A. Meeks, The Prophet King: Moses Traditions and Johannean Christology (Leiden, 1967) 122-125 (in Philo), 140-142 (Josephus), 156-159 (OT Pseudepigrapha), 205-211 (rabbinic midrash), and 241-246 (Samaritan tradition). For the provenance of the seven heavens, see A. Y. Collins, Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism (Leiden/NY, 1996) 25-54, and for arabor as the name of the highest heaven and locus of the throne of God, see for example III Enoch 17:3, tr. P. Alexander, in J. H. Charlesworth, ed., The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha (NY:1983), vol. 1:269, and Alexander’s note ‘d’ directing the reader as well to the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Hagigah 12b. See also I. Chernus, Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism: Studies in the History of Midrash (Berlin/NY, 1982) 89 and 94-95.

\(^3\) I read the παρουσία of MT 1.3, 1000C (144:7-9), as equivalent to the rabbinic shekinah. The latter’s radical, παρ-, signifies dwelling, inhabiting, and the noun is usually translated into English as ‘Presence’. See A. M. Goldberg, Untersuchungen über die Vorstellung der Shekinah in der frühen rabbinischen Literatur (Berlin, 1969), esp. 531-538, and for the targums, D.
clear by what immediately follows in his Epistles I through V, especially Epistle III on the 'sudden'.

I submit that the first five epistles of the Dionysian corpus function as a kind of chiasm which helps to complete the thought of the Mystical Theology4. Epistle I continues the themes of divine darkness and unknowing which preoccupy the latter treatise: God’s transcendent darkness (here σκότος) is ‘hidden by the light of knowledge’, Dionysius says, while ‘complete unknowing is the knowledge of Him Who is known to transcend all things’5. Very good, but then this is met and counteracted by the opening line of Epistle V: ‘The divine darkness [γνώφος] is the unapproachable light in which God is said to dwell’6. God’s dwelling place, κοινωνίας, recalls — and not, I think, accidentally — the thrust and background of John’s scholiastic on the araphel, the place of the divine throne which, in the ancient traditions of both apocalyptic literature and of later Rabbinic merkabah texts, is always characterized

Muñoz-León, Gloria de la Shekinah en los targumim de Penteteuco (Madrid, 1977), esp. 487-494. Given this background, the passage I have in mind from MT 13 becomes quite interesting. Dionysius is commenting on the LXX version of Ex 24:10, the elders of Israel ‘saw the place of the Shekinah where He [i.e., the God of Israel] stood’. He goes on: τοῦτο δὲ διὰ δυσμών τοῖς ὑποθετικῶσιν τινας ἐν ζωής λόγοις ... δι’ ἄρτι ἐνθρόνος ἐντοιχίᾳ αὐχενίᾳ ... τὸν ἄνθρωπον αὐτοῦ τόπον ἐκπαλαισθαί. The key to a link with the Shekinah seems to me to lie in the tie between parashat and the participle, ἐπεράθεται. C. Liubeheh translates the latter as ‘walking’, Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works (NY, 1987) 137. I would render it a little differently. The meanings assigned to ἐπεράθεται in Lampe, A Patristic Greek Lexicon 517, include ‘mounting’, as on a horse, or carried in the sense of ‘being a passenger’ (meanings four and five) with ‘standing’, ‘setting foot on’, or ‘ranging over’ as the first meaning. Rather than the last, effectively Liubeheh’s choice, I would read instead, ‘His Presence beyond all conception ... standing upon’ — or ‘borne’ or ‘carried by’, or even ‘mounted upon’ — ‘His most holy places’. The scriptural echo would then also include Ezk 3:12, the song of the cherubim, ‘Blessed is the Glory of God [יָשָׁר יְשֵׁבָה, δόξα τοῦ κυρίου] from His place [יהוה ישב, Gk τότος τοῦ κυρίου]’, and we would have thus an allusion to Ezekiel’s vision of the chariot throne as well as to the theophany of Ex 24,10. The role these two texts played in both Jewish and Christian mystical traditions is difficult to exaggerate. See, for example, Evagrius Ponticus’ use of the τότος of Ex 24,10 in his chapters and letters, Evagrius Ponticus, ed. W. Frankenberg (Berlin, 1912) 425, 427, 441,449, and esp. 593. For Evagrius’ use of traditions shared with the targums, N. Söjd, ‘La shekinah et ses amis araméens’, Cahiers d’Orientalisme 22 (1968) 233-242. On Ezk 1ff., see the brief but richly suggestive article by G. Quispel, ‘Ezekiel 1:26 in Jewish Mysticism’, VC 34 (1980) 1-13; and J. Fossam, ‘Jewish-Christian Christology and Jewish Mysticism’, VC 37 (1983) 260-287. Dionysius’ Moses, in sum, comes before the Presence (Shekinah) enthroned, and that the latter is Christ becomes clear in the Epistles following. On ‘place’, הָסִינָה, as itself a divine name in Rabbinic tradition and, indeed, as overlapping with Shekinah, see R. J. Zwi Werblowsky’s ‘Prolegomenon’ to the reprint of A. Marmorstein, The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God, Vol II: Essays in Anthropomorphism (Oxford, 1937; repr. NY, 1968) xii-xiv.

4 I have made this argument regarding the ‘sudden’ and the chiasmic structure of Epistles I-V elsewhere, esp. in Et introibo ad altare dei: The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita (Thessalonica, 1994) 222-229, but not with the same range of supporting texts as here.


6 Ep. V, 1073A (162:3-4). For the same equation, γνώφος = ἀπρόστατον φῶς (or Ex. 20, 21 = I Tim 6,16), see also DN VII, 2, 869A (196:11-12).
by overwhelming light or fire. Light is both the Presence Himself, and the stream which proceeds from Him. Thus we find Dionysius continuing:

And if it [i.e., the unapproachable light] is invisible because of its superabundant clarity, and unapproachable because of its transcendent outpouring of light, yet it is here that everyone enters [γινεται] who has been made worthy of seeing and knowing God. He then goes on to cite David and, especially, Paul as examples of this experience. Let me draw attention to two additional points here. First, the ‘entering into’ the divine presence deploys the same verb, γινεται, as Dionysius uses in Epistle X concerning those holy ascetics who, even in this life, are ‘already with God [ὁδε μετα του θεου γινομενους]’9. Second, another scholion will help us in identifying a key theophany to which I believe Dionysius will shortly be alluding in Epistle III. On the ‘unapproachable light’, the scholion makes the seemingly humdrum observation that the experience of the visio dei might be compared to trying to stare at the sun’s disk at noon, μεταβηριτι.10

The ‘transcendent outpouring of light’ leads us to the matter of God’s self-communication, which I take to be the subject of Epistles II and IV. In the former, Dionysius alludes back to the distinction which he had sketched, in Divine Names II and XI, between God in se and ad extra11. God truly gives

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8 Ep. V, 1073A (162:4-6).

9 Ep. X, 1117B (208:12-13). I feel free to call them ascetics because Dionysius’ vocabulary here makes that identification very clear. He refers to them ‘withdrawing [ἀφαγορασόμε] from material things’ and ‘living … like angels among men’, with ‘dispassion [ἀπαθεία] and holiness [ἀκεραιοτητα]’ (208:8-209-4). The combination of anachoresis, angelic life, dispassion, and holiness — with the latter very possibly rendering the Syriac δεινος, a terminus technicus for consecrated celibacy — adds up unmistakably to monks.

10 PG 4, 536B.

11 See DN II.11, 649B-D (135:10-136:17); note the reference to θεονιας in 649CD (136:13-17), followed at once by the ‘one’, ‘one’, ‘one’ of the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit in 649D-
Himself, the Areopagite states in Epistle II, and truly deifies, but while He is Himself the deifying gift, θεοποιοῦν δῶρον, He yet transcends all the relations He enters into. He gives of His actions, ἐνέργεια, or powers, δυνάμεις, but not of His essence, οἰκονομία.\footnote{Ep. II, 1068A-1069A (158:4-10).} Epistle IV makes clear the source of this gift of divine energy or power. It is in Jesus, Dionysius tells us, transcendence and immanence (here ἀπόφροσις and κατάφροσις, respectively) have met and been joined. Those things, he goes on, ‘which are affirmed of Jesus’ love for humanity preserve the force of transcendental negation’. Therefore, he concludes,

[Christ] did not do what is divine as God, nor what is human as man, but instead [as] God having become man, He has administered to [or, arranged for] us a certain, new divine-human activity.\footnote{Ep. IV, 1072BC (161:4-10).}

I admit that my translation of πεπολυτεμένος here as a deponent participle is questionable. The usual rendering applies the ‘theandric activity’ entirely to Christ, as in the Paulist Press translation: ‘He accomplished something new in our midst — the activity of the God-man’\footnote{Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works 265.}. I respond by noting, first, that πολυτεμούμενον can carry an object, and mean thus ‘arrange for’ or ‘administer’\footnote{See CH II.2, 165AB (18:2-4 and 16-17). So EH II 1.1, 372AB (63:12-64:6), and see above, note 11, for DN II.11 and θεονομία.}. Second, I think that, whether my translation is strictly acceptable or not, it still serves in either case to convey something which Dionysius believes is fundamentally true about the Incarnation, and that is that the latter affords us a real participation in God’s own actions and gifts. Let us recall his definition of hierarchy in Celestial Hierarchy III.2, which includes the description of a hierarchy’s members as ‘spotless mirrors of the primordial light’ called to ‘shew forth the divine ἐνέργεια’ in themselves, and, in Ecclesiastical Hierarchy I, his reference to Jesus Who ‘makes our life, disposition, and activity ἐνέργεια something divine’\footnote{See EH II.2.4, 396A (71:15); III.3.11, 441C (91:23); and Ep. IX, 1113A (206:2).}. I could multiply examples, but these will suffice to make my point: Christ’s divine-human activity comes to us, and does so specifically in the divine polity and way of life — the ἔνεργεια πολιτεία, as Dionysius puts it elsewhere\footnote{See EH II.2.4, 396A (71:15); III.3.11, 441C (91:23); and Ep. IX, 1113A (206:2).} — of the Church. It is in the latter that we receive the ‘deifying gift’ mentioned in Epistle II, and it is in and

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\footnote{652A (136:18-137:5); also DN XI.6, 953C-956B (222:3-223:3) against the notion of the ‘powers’, δυνάμεις, which God shares with us as discrete entities, even though they are somehow distinct from the divine being, and cf. DN V.2, 816C (181:7-15) for the same assertion. John of Scythopolis thus righty directs his readers to the second of these passages in his scholion on Ep. II, PG 4, 529B-D (ET: Rorem/Lamoreaux 251).}
through the Church that we are led to encounter the mystery of Christ’s divinity in a ‘transcendent outpouring of light’.

These several points, together indeed with the entire corpus itself, are summed up by the center and punchline of the chiasm, Epistle III:

‘Suddenly’ means that which comes forth from the hitherto invisible and beyond hope into manifestation. And I think that here the scripture [lit., theology] is suggesting the philanthropy of Christ. The super-essential has proceeded out of its hiddenness to become manifest to us by becoming a human being. But He is also hidden, both after the manifestation and, to speak more divinely, even within it. For this is the hidden of Jesus, and neither by rational discourse nor by intuition can His mystery [μυστήριον] be explained, but instead, even when spoken it remains ineffable [ἀκριβής], and when conceived with the intellect, unknowable [ἀγνωστόν] 18.

The first thing we notice is the reprise of the themes of the Mystical Theology: divine unknowability and ineffability, together with the tension between transcendent hiddenness and revelation. Secondly, there is surely a sacramental echo in the reference to the μυστήριον of the Incarnation. Christ is the sacrament, both at the center and terminus of the divine进程 to us and to our world, and, simultaneously, the vehicle and goal of our return, or ascent 19.

The real force and key here to the coalescence of Dionysius’ thought, however, lies in the ‘suddenly’, ἐξαίρεσις, which opens the epistle. To use the expression of a colleague of mine, it is a ‘hook word’, pulling multiple associations up and together at once 20. On the one hand, Werner Beierwaltes and Raul Mortley have rightly noted that Dionysius’ ‘sudden’ has an ancestry in the Platonic tradition 21. Plato himself uses it three times: in the Parmenides to indicate the timeless moment of intersection between the eternal, unmoving realm of the Forms and the world of serial time and flux; again in the Symposium to signify the end and goal of the ascent of eros to the vision of Beauty, and lastly, in Epistle VII (if by Plato himself), for the ‘sudden’ conclusion of the philosopher’s quest in, perhaps, the vision of divinity. All these are certainly important Dionysian themes — eros, beauty, stasis/motion, eternity/time. Then there is Plotinus’ use of the ‘sudden’ in Enneads V.3.17; 5.7;

18 Ep. III, 1069B (159:3-10).
19 In other words, the Neoplatonist cycle of πρόσωπο—ἐξειδικησία as here summed up in Christ.

and VI.7.36 to the notes of light.

It is at this point, then, that the scriptures and the apologetic appearances of passages in early Christian texts are Acts 9, 22 and 28. The identical description of the second day [μεσημβρία] to the overwhelming light of converting that of the alleged master, ’Jesus’ as we saw above, is a reposition to the ‘Gracious Master’ of the Epistle 24. Luke’s introduction of the angel to the Greeks 25.

The fourth text, where Christ was said to Master find them in the light, the angel brought it to the Greeks.

The following pages are not, I should not have time and space I have just under... 22 Typically, whi... apparatus, Heil/Ritter ad loc. 1100A (190:5 ff), the Christ on the heaven... Vita Antonii and... 23 Paul and the μαθητής 12) and later rabbinic... zur Rechten Gottes 1993) 108-194, esp. Saul the Pharisee (N... 24 Ep. VII, 1077... 170:8). This would suggest conformity with the... in the Johannine use of philosophic...
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and VI.7.36 to signal the vision of the One in light22. Here, too, especially in the notes of light and vision, we find an echo in the Areopagite.

It is at this point, however, that modern Dionysian scholarship stops short. It thus remains entirely insensitive to the resonances which the ‘sudden’ has in the scriptures and later Christian literature. I have in mind especially four appearances of ἔξωθήνησις in the New Testament, together with certain passages in early ascetic literature and in Ephrem Syrus. The New Testament texts are Acts 9.3; 22.6; Lk 2.13; and Mk 13.36. The first two are functionally identical descriptions of St. Paul’s conversion on the Damascus Road. I quote from the second: ‘And it happened that as I was travelling … at around midday ἔστι Ἀνέλθον τῇ ἀνάμνεσις ἡ ἡμέρα ἀπόκεφαλις ἀμφιβολή θεοῦ ἐκ τῆς φωτογραφίας ἀπεκρίθη. The overwhelming light, of course, is Christ, Who sends Paul on to his life’s work of converting the gentiles23. I note the associations with Paul, Dionysius’ alleged master, with light, with the manifestation of Christ, with the ‘midday’ we saw above signaled by the scholion, and, perhaps not least, with the mission to the ‘Greeks’ which Dionysius says he is continuing in his Seventh Epistle24. Luke 2.13 links the ‘sudden’ to the gloria in excelsis, the manifestation of the angelic liturgy to the shepherds at the moment of the Incarnation. The fourth text, Mk 13.36, occurs at the end of the eschatological discourse where Christ warns His listeners to be watchful, lest returning ‘suddenly’, the Master find them asleep. The New Testament thus ties the ‘sudden’ to Christ, light, the angelic liturgy, the eschaton, and, not least, St. Paul and the mission to the Greeks.

The following appearances of the ‘sudden’ in later Christian literature are not, I should note, the result of a systematic search, but of purely accidental discovery. Every one of them, however, recalls one or more of the associations I have just underlined, and on occasion adds to them. The earliest comes from

22 Typically, while all these echoes of Plato and Plotinus are correctly noted in the critical apparatus, Heil/Ritter 159, the latter lists nothing in the NT or other Christian literature. Of note: the ἔξωθήνησις appears in one other place in Dionysius: CH XV.2, 329C (53:1), on the ‘sudden’ appearance of fire as an illustration of divinity. Also, and quite significantly, in Ep. VIII.6, 1100A (190:5 ff), the related term, δάφνος, opens the description of Bishop Carpus’ vision of Christ on the heavenly throne — thus see n.3 above as well as my discussion of the ‘sudden’ in the Vita Antonii and Apocryphal Acts below, together with nn. 26 and 33.

23 Paul and the mysticism of light as related at once to apocalyptic ascent (cf. 2 Cor 3:4 and 12) and later rabbinic merkabah literature have come recently under increasing scholarly attention. See, for example, M. Hengel, “Setze dich zur meiner Rechten!” Die Intronization Christi zur Rechten Gottes und Psalmen 110:1’, in Le trône de Dieu, ed. M. Philonenko (Tübingen, 1993) 108-194, esp. 165-174, and A. Segal, Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee (New Haven, CT, 1990), esp. 9-11, 58-64, and 152-157.

24 Ep. VII, 1077B-1081C (165-170), esp. 1080AB (165:12-167:2) and 1081C (169:14-170:8). This would also thus place the ἔξωθήνησις and its NT associations in at least partial conformity with the widely held view of the Areopagita as fundamentally an apology for the Christian use of philosophy. I have no difficulty with this view, but I also regard it as dangerously incomplete. See below, n.53.
the third century apocryphon *The Acts of Thomas*. In the ‘Hymn of the Pearl’, perhaps of independent origin but placed here in the Apostle’s mouth, Thomas sings of ‘suddenly’ encountering the ‘robe of glory’ woven for him in heaven. The context makes it clear that the robe is equivalent to the ‘luminous image’ familiar from Jewish and Jewish-Christian literature, and that the speaker’s clothing with it represents a mystical experience. That experience, moreover (and recalling our observations above on the *araphel* and the ascent of Moses), is one of heavenly ascent: clothed with the robe of light, the Apostle goes up to the ‘gate of greeting’ where he worships the ‘Radiance [φαντασία] of the Father’, that is to say, Christ. In two other works of the same genre from the early and late fourth century, the *Cologne Mani Codex* and the *Acts of Philip*, respectively, we find the associations of ἔξωθεν with ascent and rapture — to heaven and the heavenly throne, in the former, and to the manifestation of Christ as light ‘shining seven times more brilliantly than the sun’, in the latter. In Athanasius of Alexandria’s *Life of Anthony*, the father of monks is rescued from demonic temptation by the ‘sudden’ beam of light from heaven which comforts him with the voice of Christ. Finally, in Ephrem Syrus, the ‘sudden’ occurs at least three times. In his *Hymns on Nature* [6.7], it is Christ Who is the ‘star of light Who shone forth suddenly’ at the Incarnation, while in the *Paradise Hymns*, the ‘sudden’ occurs first [5.11] in reference to the angelic liturgy. The τρισάγιον of the Seraphim ‘suddenly’ breaks the silence when the angelic hymn is mentioned here in parallel to a reference to the thunders of the theophany on

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26 That is, as placed in the Apostle’s mouth, the hymn is made to speak of his experience. On the Thomas tradition, including both the *Acts* and the *Gospel of Thomas*, as embodying a light mysticism of the divine form, see G. Quispel, ‘Sein und Gestalt’, in Studies in Religion and Mysticism Presented to Gershom Scholem (Jerusalem, 1967) 190-195; idem, Makarios, das Thomas-evangelium, and das Lied von der Perle (Leiden, 1967), esp. 39-64; and very recently, A. DeConick, *Seek to See Him*: Ascent and Vision Mysticism in the Gospel of Thomas (Leiden, 1996). On the luminous image in Judaism, see again Goshen-Gottstein, ‘The Body of God as Image’, 178-183, and on this visionary tradition as a factor in Dionysius’ motives for his enterprise, see n.33 below.
29 Vita Antonii 10. PG 26, 860A.
31 *De par.* 5.11, CSCO 346:70. *Hymns on Paradise* (Crosland 32 *De par.* 15.4, 63-3; ‘sudden’ for Ephrem here).
32 ‘Ascent of the Virgin’, in Tytler and 78, where Schmidt added treatments of the Sinai theologia *et introibo* 368-370.
33 Thus, to continue, directed especially in the work of apocalyptic literature and the traditional ordering of *CH II* with an analysis of the Apocalypse. Note, for example, that Ezekiel the Prophet (Paris, 1908), Vol. IV:544 with Judaism, notably equivalent to shekinah — terms with Christ; and, seeing thus the greater presence in *Ep. III* echoes the fortuitous. Dionysius is, in order to reply to this current of St. Paul. Part of his reply, heaven, on the one hand, accord with, and indeed *in the Macarian Homilies*. For literature, see again Golitzin.
34 I think it likely he did an Introduction to their In Eye: The Spiritual World on possible Syriac-Greek
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The second appearance of the ‘Sudden’ in the Paradise Hymns adds something new to our set of associations: the liturgy on earth, specifically the Eucharist. Ephrem is speaking about the supper of the risen Christ with the two disciples at Emmaus in Luke 24:

When the disciples’ eyes were closed, bread too was the key whereby their eyes were opened to recognize the Omnipotent One: darkened eyes beheld a vision of joy and were suddenly filled with happiness.

It seems to me that, on the basis of just these eleven texts, we have evidence of a certain tradition or at least current in Christian (and, counting Mani, para-Christian) literature which linked the ‘sudden’ to Christ, to light, to heavenly ascent, and to the liturgies of both the angels and the Church. Assuming that Dionysius knew Syriac, there is perhaps an additional play on the ‘sudden’. The Syriac phrase which renders the Greek word is ܕܳܠܳܐ ܕܳܡܫܳܠܳܝ (men shelya), which means ‘shamāliyya, or ‘shambaliyya’, on the other hand, has interesting associations. It contains the meanings ‘rest’, ‘silence’, and ‘rest’.

31 De par. 5.11, CSCO 174, 18:6-11 (men shelya line 7); ET: S. Brock, Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise (Crestwood, NY, 1990) 106 (slightly amended).

32 De par. 15.4, 63:3-8 (line 8 for men shelya); ET: Brock 183. On the importance of the ‘sudden’ for Ephrem here, see M. Schmidt, ‘Altestamentliche Typologien in den Paradisesthesmen von Ephrem’, in Typus, Symbol, Allegorie, ed. M. Schmidt (Regensburg, 1981), esp. 64-65 and 78, where Schmidt also notes the parallels between Ephrem and Dionysius in their respective treatments of the Sinai theophany (thus the echo, too, of the MT). See also in this regard Goltzlin, Et introibo 368-370.

33 Thus, to continue my remarks in nn 24 and 26 above, I see the Corpus Dionysiacum as directed especially in reply to monks and ascetics enamored of the ascetical tradition dating from apocalyptic literature and with contemporary parallels in Jewish merkah mysticism. Accepting the traditional ordering of the treatises and epistles, note how the CD begins its proper work in CH II with an analysis of, essentially, Ezek 1ff., and concludes in Ep. X by addressing the author of the Apocalypse. Note, too, the exactly contemporary homily of Jacob of Serug, ‘On the Chariot that Ezekiel the Prophet Saw’, Mar Jacobi Sarugensis: Homilie Selectae, ed. P. Bedjan (Paris, 1908), Vol. IV:543-610, with, first, its application of divine Glory shared with Judaism, notably ܓܘܼܪܳܫܳܠ (559:13; 571:17; 576:2; 592:5; and 593:13) and — the Aramaic equivalent of shekinah — ܓܘܼܪܳܫܳܐ (569:21; 570:13; and 602:25), in each case identifying the terms with Christ; and, second, its warnings against seeking to ascend to the chariot while ignoring thus the greater presence of Christ at the Eucharistic altar (esp. 605:16-606:6). That the ‘sudden’ in Ep. III echoes the Apocryphal Acts, Mani, and the Vita Antonii is therefore not simply fortuitous. Dionysius is, in a sense, forging his own ‘NT apocryphon’ or ‘pseudo-apigraphon’ in order to reply to this current with a countervailing antiquity of his own, the philosopher-disciple of St. Paul. Part of his reply, finally, linking the visible worship of the Church with the liturgy of heaven, on the one hand, and the encounter with Christ within the soul, on the other, is fully in accord with, and indeed mirrors, such earlier Syrian Christian ascetic literature as, for example, the Macarian Homilies. For Dionysius’ relation to the latter and related Syrian Christian literature, see again Goltzlin, Et introibo 359-392.

34 I think it likely he did, pace P. Rorem, Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to their Influence (Oxford/NY, 1993) 70. See in contrast S. Brock, The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World of Saint Ephrem the Syrian (Kalamazoo, MI, 1992) 147 and 180, n.6, on possible Syriac-Greek puns in Dionysius. The ‘sudden’ here may well be another.
and ‘stillness’, and is usually connected in Christian Syriac with the hermits, as is ἡσυχία in Christian Greek. It may also, though, be used, as Dionyius’ precise contemporary, Philoxenus of Mabbug, uses it, to signify the divine being or essence. As a bilingual pun playing off of these different resonances, the ‘sudden’ fits indeed very well into the several intentions and associations of the Corpus Dionysiacum, and particularly of the Mystical Theology. I am reminded of yet another Syrian, in fact of the one Church Father whom Dionysius felt it safe to quote by name, Ignatius of Antioch, who characterized Christ as the Word who proceeds from the Father’s silence (σιτή), and who continued, in another epistle, with a further echo of the themes of the Mystical Theology and the Dionysian epistles: ‘It is better to keep silence and to be, than to talk and not to be … He that truly possesses the word of Jesus is able to listen to His silence’. The bishop of Antioch’s concluding words will lead us directly to our own final paragraph: ‘Let us therefore do all things as knowing that He dwells in us, that we may be His temples and He Himself may be in us as our God’.

We have arrived at the scriptural text which John of Scythopolis tells us Dionysius is actually quoting in Epistle III. It is Malachi 3:1: ‘And suddenly the Lord Whom you seek will come into His temple, and the Angel of great counsel whom you desire’. The historical Incarnation is part of the message here, certainly, but, pace Beierwaltes and Mortley, it is not the whole message. I would also point to the coordination between the temple of the liturgical assembly and the temple of the Christian’s body and soul which runs throughout the Corpus Dionysiacum, and which I have discussed at length elsewhere. I would then add those echoes of experience, specifically of a mystical the-
mystical theophany of the light of Christ, which were hinted at by John’s scholion on the araphel and which characterize the ‘sudden’ in the Christian literature we have just finished surveying. Given these associations, we can surely say that the Dionysian ‘suddenly’ also intends to signify the presence of Christ on the eucharistic altar, His body after all, and His visitation — ‘beyond hope’, ‘inexpressible’, ‘unapproachable’, to cite our Epistle — within the temple of the soul. This, the sudden flash of the ‘unapproachable light’ within, is, I submit, the content of the γνώρισμα into which Moses ascends in Mystical Theology 1.3, as well as of the ‘consummation’ and ‘access’ of Ecclesiastical Hierarchy 4.3.12, where Christ is both the way and the goal, the altar of our own ‘mystical holocaust’ and the divine chrism which sanctifies that altar 40. His third Epistle is thus Dionysius in a nutshell: christological, liturgical, and — yes — mystical. The worship of the heavenly and earthly churches, the experience of the transcendent God, the hope of the Christian, all meet on the altar which is Christ. In Him the several concerns of the Dionysian corpus — angels and human beings, sacraments and mysticism, objective and subjective, hierarchy and personal encounter, clergy and ascetic visions, Christian revelation and Platonic tradition, the present life and the eschaton 41 — all meet and join and are one.

the holy man in III.3.7, 473A (86:7-16) as physician and temple, ναός; relatedly IV.3.4, 477B-480A (98:14-99:14) for the ‘fragrance of Jesus’ within the intellect; to which I would add the holy man and disciple used as Dionysius’ preferred illustration of divine fatherhood and sonship in the Trinity, in DN II.8, 645C (132:6-13); and finally Ep. VIII.3, 1069A (182:3ff.) for the double use of τάξις as applied both to the outer structures of the Church hierarchy and the inner faculties of the soul. For τάξις as a term in use in ascetical discourse for the inner ordering of the soul, see G. Gould, The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community (Oxford, 1993) 151-152.

40 EH IV.3.12, 484D (103:4-8): ... ἐπὶ τὸ δειπνόν τοῦ ἡμῶν θεοστρατήματος ἦσον ... ἐν ἀθέτητι τὸ λόγον, ἀνιεροῦμενοι καὶ μοισεῖκος ἀλκοούομενοι τὴν προσευχὴν ἔχομεν ... The ‘consecration’ and ‘mystical holocaust’ of each Christian at the altar which is Christ, by the myron which is also Christ, seems to me to offer a parallel to the ascent of Moses into the darkness and the stripping away of his powers in order to know unknowingly. So see again Gollitz, ‘Liturgy and Mysticism’ 52-57, and, on the importance of the myron generally in Syrian Christianity, together with its use as an illustration of Christ’s divinity, W. Struthmann, Das Sakrament der Myron-Welte in der Schrift De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia des Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita in syrischen Übersetzungen und Kommentaren (Wiesbaden, 1978), esp. pp. liii-lx.

41 Dionysius has been accused of being ‘devoid of eschatology’; see P. Rorem, Pseudo-Dionysius: An Introduction 120-122. This is simply untrue. Besides DN I.4’s contrast between the ‘now’ of symbols and ‘then’ of the eschaton (cf. also I Cor 13,12, and, on the identical νῦν — τότε δὲ constructions in the Macarian Homilies, Gollitzin, Et introibo 375-376), which Rorem acknowledges, there is also the explicit and emphatic affirmation of the general Resurrection, at length in EH VII.1.1-2ff., as well as similar affirmations scattered elsewhere throughout the corpus, and, perhaps most notably (though I never remarked on this in the scholarly literature), the splendid evocation of the messianic banquet in Ep. IX.5, 1112D-1113A (205:8-206:7).