

The Ladder of Divine Ascent

also known as “Scala, Climax Paradisi”

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Entry tags: Orthodoxy, Sayings Text (Greek: Apophthegmata), Monastic Rules, Rule Text, Monasticism, Text, Religious Group, Early Christianity

The “Ladder of Divine Ascent” is an ascetical treatise written by John of the Ladder (also called Scholasticus or Sinaites-of Sinai). John (579-650) received a general education and at the age of 16 he took monastic vows, lived as an anchorite at the foot of Mount Sinai and eventually became abbot of the monastery of St. Catherine of Sinai. The text is addressed to John, abbot of the Monastery of Raithou, who requested a text specifically for the spiritual benefit of the monks of his monastery. The treatise was inspired by the Biblical account of Jacob’s Ladder (Gen. 28:10 ff). The treatise consists of thirty chapters that represent the rungs of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven. The number thirty is symbolic of the thirty years of the “hidden life” of Jesus Christ. The idea behind this symbolism is that the monk, through his gradual spiritual ascension, may become a perfect man in the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. The titles of the thirty rungs-chapters of the divine ladder are named after the virtues that a monk must pursue and cultivate, and the vices that must be banished. The distinctive feature of the treatise, which is actually the cause for its special popularity, is the particularly graphic concept of the Ladder, offering thus to the fervent monk-reader a means of ascent to heaven. The imagery of the Ladder to heaven is not a Christian invention. It operated as an allegory for spiritual development long before Christianity. John’s contribution lies on the transformation of an imagery of a rather vague allegory of spiritual progress into a practical -so to speak- spiritual exercise, by identifying each step of a monk’s effort with a particular and positive achievement. Hence, with the exception of the Scriptures and the liturgical books, no other text in Eastern Christendom has been studied, copied and translated to the same extent as the “Ladder of Divine Ascent”. It was the most widely used handbook of the ascetic life in the ancient Greek Church and became very popular among monks and laymen in both East and West. It spread across the Byzantine Empire and affected Christian spiritual leaders such as Theodore the Studite, Symeon the New Theologian, Nicetas Stethatus, the Hesychastic movement, while it was pivotal in the fifteenth-century monastic revival in Russia. In the West, the treatise enjoyed popularity especially among Franciscans, Benedictines, Cistercians, the monks of Chartreuse, who also wrote commentaries on it, and to a lesser degree among Jesuits. The text was translated in Arabic and Georgian before the tenth century, into Romanian by the early seventeenth century. A Latin translation, albeit fragmentary, appeared at least as early as the eleventh century. The first Italian translation was made in 1474. The text also appeared in Portuguese in the fourteenth century, in Spanish in 1504, in French in 1603, and in German in 1834. Furthermore, among the first books printed in America was a Spanish edition of the “Ascent of the Divine Ladder”, published in Mexico during the sixteenth century. The first English translation appeared as late as 1858.



Date Range: 579 CE - 650 CE

Region: Mount Sinai, Monastery of St. Catherine

Region tags: Egypt, Egyptian Desert

The Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai, where John of the Ladder composed the “Ladder of the Divine Ascent”.

Status of Readership:

✓ Religious Specialists ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Sources and Corpora

Print Sources

Print sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Luibheid, Colm; Russell, Norman. *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Paulist Press. ISBN 0809123304
- Source 2: Mack, John. *Ascending the Heights: A Layman's Guide to the Ladder of Divine Ascent*. ISBN 1888212179
- Source 3: Anastasius, *Narratives*, in F. Nau, 'Le texte grec des re´cits du moine Anastase sur les saints pe`res du Sinai,' in *Oriens Christianus* II (1902), 58–89 and III (1903), 56–90.

Online Sources

Online sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-John-Climacus>
- Source 1 Description: Saint John Climacus
- Source 2 URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20191114150428/http://fr-d-serfes.org/orthodox/divine.htm>
- Source 2 Description: The Ladder Of Divine Ascent by St. John Climacus

Online Corpora

Relevant online Primary Textual Corpora (original languages and/or translations)

- Source 1 URL: <http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/tributes/climax/>
- Source 1 Description: The Ladder of the Divine Ascent in Greek (ancient Greek text and modern Greek translation)
- Source 2 URL: <http://www.prudencetrue.com/images/TheLadderofDivineAscent.pdf>
- Source 2 Description: The Ladder of the Divine Ascent English translation
- Source 3 URL: [http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04z/z_0525-0606__Joannes_Climacus__Scala_Paradisi_\(MPG_088_0631_1163\)__GM.pdf.html](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04z/z_0525-0606__Joannes_Climacus__Scala_Paradisi_(MPG_088_0631_1163)__GM.pdf.html)
- Source 3 Description: Joannes Climacus, *Scala_Paradisi*, Migne's edition.

General Variables

Materiality

Methods of Composition

– Written



Inked

– with Ink

Medium upon which the text is written/incised

– Papyrus

Was the material modified before the writing or incising process?

– Physical preparation

Location

Is the location where the text stored accompanied by iconography or images?

– No

Is the area where the text is stored accompanied by an-iconic images?

– No

Production & Intended Audience

Production

Is the production of the text funded by the polity?

– No

Is the text considered official religious scripture?

– No

Notes: However, up to this day the "Ascent of the Divine Ladder" is appointed to be read aloud in churches or in the refectories of Monasteries, as well as privately in the cells of Orthodox monasteries, each year during Lent.

Written in distinctly religious/sacred language?

– No

Intended Audience

What is the estimated number of people considered to be the audience of the text

This should be the total number of people who would serve as the intended audience for the text.

– Field doesn't know

Notes: The text was requested specifically for the spiritual benefit of the monks of the monastery of Raithou by its abbot, John. During the late fourth century, the ascetic community at Raithou is described as minuscule with only 43 anchorites living in caves and holes on the ground. Around the 7th century it's been said that 300 monks moved from the monastery of Raithou to the monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai, in order to escape from Saracen attacks. On the number of monks living in the

monastery when their abbot, John of Raithou, requested the text, there is no certain information available. However, excavations have uncovered the extensive ruins of the monastic complex.

Does the Religious group actively proselytize and recruit new members?

– No

Are there clear reformist movements?

(Reformism, as in not proselytizing to potential new conservative, but "conversion" - or rather, reform - to the "correct interpretation"?)

– No

Is the text in question employed in ritual practice?

– No

Notes: However indirectly. Apart from the annual commemoration on 30 March during the calendar of fixed feasts, the fourth Sunday during Lent, together with most of the liturgical texts of that day, is dedicated to the author of the text, St. John of Sinai. It should be mentioned, moreover, that the whole text is usually read from the beginning of Lent in most Orthodox Monasteries.

Is there material significance to the text?

– No

Context and Content of the Text (Beliefs and Practices)

Context

Is the text itself accompanied by art?

– Yes

↳ Calligraphy?

– Field doesn't know

↳ Illustrations?

– Yes

Notes: Illuminated manuscripts of the text survive. 33 Greek codices, dating from the 10th to the 17th century, contain introductory miniatures or extensive cycles of images, often corresponding to the specific interests of the makers or the commissioners of the manuscripts. The illustrations can be divided into three categories: the portrait of the author of the text, St. John of Sinai; the theme of the Ladder; and miniatures that illustrate parts of the content of the book.

↳ Illuminations?

– Yes

↳ Is there spiritual value associated with the coloration?

– I don't know

↳ Is there gold?

– Yes

↳ Other forms of illumination?

–Specify: There are several variants of portable icons depicting the theme of the Ladder. The icon depicts monks ascending the ladder towards Christ, depicted in the top right corner of the icon. St. John is at the top of the ladder, while in other versions is depicted in a lower corner, gesturing towards the ladder, with rows of monks behind him. Old Russian icons have more details and include the depiction of Heaven full of saints and faithful people.

Are there multiple versions of the text?

– No

Notes: The text is sufficiently faithfully transmitted, the textual variations between manuscripts being very few.

Is the text part of a collection of texts?

– No

If the text is not explicitly scripture, is it part of another important literary tradition?

– Yes

↳ Cultural with religious implications?

– No

↳ Behavioral literature?

– No

↳ Other

–Other [specify]: The text is deeply indebted to the experiences of the anchorite fathers of the Egyptian desert, as reflected in the "Apophthegmata Patrum" and it was arranged in the form of a moral treatise.

Content

Is the text - or does the text include - a ritual list, manual, bibliography, index, or vocabulary?
(Select all that apply)

– Other [specify]: The texts includes precepts for the spiritual benefit of the monks and summarizes teachings and opinions of previous ascetic and Church Fathers.

Are there lineages or a single lineage established by the text?

– No

Does the text express a formal legal code?

– No

Formulating a specifically religious calendar?

– No

Beliefs

Is a spirit-body distinction present in the text?

– Yes

↳ Spirit-Mind is conceived of as having qualitatively different powers or properties than other parts?

– Yes

↳ Spirit-mind is conceived of as non-material, ontologically distinct from body?

– No

Notes: Spirit-mind is indeed conceived of as non-material, it is not conceived, however, as ontologically distinct from the material body.

↳ Other spirit-body relationship?

– No

↳ Within conceptions of the mind: are there distinct notions of psychological states or aggregates?

– No

↳ Do practitioners engage in debates about mind-body dualism?

– No

↳ Are debates framed in other ways?

– No

↳ Do practitioners distinguish between a corporeal body and an incorporeal soul or spirit?

– Yes

↳ Are there other sides or features of the debate?

– No

↳ What are historical mainstream and minority positions?

– No

Is belief in an afterlife indicated in the text?

– Yes

↳ Is the spatial location of the afterlife specified or described by the religious group?

– No

Notes: However it is graphically depicted by the illustrations of the texts in manuscripts and icons.

↳ Is the temporality of the afterlife specified or described by the religious group?

– No

↳ Is there debate in the interpretation of the language of the afterlife?

– No

Is belief in reincarnation in this world specified in the text?

– No

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses dicated in the text?

– No

Does the text indicate if co-sacrifices should be present in burials?

– No

Does the text specify grave goods for burial?

– No

Are formal burials present in the text?

– No

Are there practices that have funerary associations presented in the text?

– No

Are supernatural beings present in the text?

– Yes

↳ A supreme high-god is present

– Yes

↳ The supreme high god is anthropomorphic or described in anthropomorphic terms

– No

↳ The supreme high god is a sky deity

– No

↳ The supreme high god is chthonic (of the underworld)

– No

↳ The supreme high god is fused with the monarch (king=high god)

– No

↳ The monarch is seen as a manifestation or emanation of the high god

– No

↳ The supreme high god is a kin relation to elites

– No

↳ The supreme high god has another type of loyalty-connection to elites

– No

- ↳ The supreme high god is unquestionably good
 - Yes

- ↳ Other features of the supreme high god
 - Specify: free, giver of life, loving, benevolent.

- ↳ The supreme high god has knowledge of this world
 - Yes
 - ↳ Knowledge is restricted to a particular domain of human affairs
 - No
 - ↳ Knowledge is restricted to (a) specific area(s) within the sample region
 - No
 - ↳ Knowledge is unrestricted within the sample region
 - Yes
 - ↳ Knowledge is unrestrict outside of sample region
 - Yes
 - ↳ Can see you everywhere normally visible (in public)
 - Yes
 - ↳ Can see you everywhere (in the dark, at home)
 - Yes
 - ↳ Can see inside heart/mind (hidden motives)
 - Yes
 - ↳ Knows basic character (personal essence)
 - Yes
 - ↳ Knows what will happen to you, what you will do (future sight)
 - Yes

- ↳ Has other knowledge of this world
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Has deliberate causal efficacy in the world
 - Yes
- ↳ Can reward
 - Yes
- ↳ Can punish
 - Yes
- Yes
- ↳ Can reward
 - Yes
- ↳ Can punish
 - Yes
- ↳ Indirect causal efficacy in the world
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Exhibits positive emotion
 - Yes
- ↳ Exhibits negative emotion
 - No
- ↳ Possesses Hunger?
 - No
- ↳ Can be hurt?
 - No
- ↳ Can be tricked?

– No

↳ Can be imprisoned?

– No

↳ Is it permissible to worship supernatural being other than the high god?

– No

↳ The supreme high god communicates with the living

– Yes

↳ In waking, everyday life

– Yes

↳ In dreams

– Yes

↳ In trance possession

– No

↳ Through divination practices

– No

↳ Only through religious specialists

– No

↳ Only through monarch

– No

↳ Other form of communication with living

– Yes

Notes: Through prayer.

↳ Does the text make communication with supreme high-god possible?

– I don't know

Previously human spirits are present

– No

Non-human supernatural beings are present

– Yes

Notes: The text refers to angels and demons.

↳ Supernatural beings can be seen

– Yes

↳ Supernatural beings can be physically felt

– No

↳ Non-human supernatural beings have knowledge of this world

– I don't know

↳ Non-human supernatural beings have deliberate causal efficacy in the world

– No

↳ Non-human supernatural beings communicate with the living according to the text?

– Yes

↳ In waking, everyday life?

– Yes

↳ In dreams?

– Yes

↳ In trance possession?

– No

↳ Through divination practices?

– No

↳ Only through religious specialists?

– No

↳ Only through monarch?

– No

↳ These supernatural beings have indirect causal efficacy in the world

– Yes

↳ These supernatural beings exhibit positive emotion

– Yes

Notes: Yes, as far as the angels are concerned.

↳ These supernatural beings exhibit negative emotion

– Yes

Notes: Yes, as far as the demons are concerned.

↳ These supernatural beings possess hunger

– No

Does the text attest to a pantheon of supernatural beings?

– No

Are mixed human-divine beings present according to the text?

– No

Is there a supernatural being that is physically present in the/as a result of the text?

– No

Are other categories of beings present?

–Other [specify]: No

Does the text guide divination practices?

– No

Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present in the text?

– No

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment in the text?

– No

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards in the text?

– Yes

↳ Is the cause/purpose of supernatural rewards known?

– I don't know

↳ Supernatural rewards are bestowed out in the afterlife?

– Yes

↳ Highly emphasized by the religious group?

– Yes

↳ Reward in the afterlife consists of mild sensory pleasure?

– I don't know

↳ Consists of extreme sensory pleasure?

– Yes

Notes: Sensory pleasure in the sense of the eternal participation, or view, of the Divine Grace.

↳ Consists of eternal happiness?

– Field doesn't know

↳ Consists of reincarnation as a superior life form?

– No

↳ Consists of reincarnation in a superior realm?

– No

↳ Other?

– No

↳ Supernatural rewards are bestowed out in this lifetime?

– Yes

- ↳ Highly emphasized?
 - Yes
- ↳ Consists of good luck?
 - No
- ↳ Consists of political success or power?
 - No
- ↳ Consists of success in battle?
 - No
- ↳ Consists of peace or social stability?
 - No
- ↳ Consists of healthy crops or good weather?
 - No
- ↳ Consists of success on journeys?
 - No
- ↳ Reward in this life consists of mild sensory pleasure?
 - No
- ↳ Reward in this life consists of extreme sensory pleasure?
 - No
- ↳ Reward in this life consists of enhanced health?
 - No
 - Notes: It consists more of spiritual health, rather than physical/bodily health.
- ↳ Reward in this life consists of enhanced reproductive success?
 - No
- ↳ Reward in this life consists of fortune visited on descendants?
 - No

↳ Other?

– Specify: A kind of reward is apathy, or dispassion and spiritual perfection.

Messianism/Eschatology

Are messianic beliefs present in the text?

– No

Is an eschatology present in the text?

– No

Norms & Moral Realism

Are general social norms prescribed by the text?

– No

Is there a conventional vs. moral distinction in the religious text?

– Yes

↳ What is the nature of this distinction?

– Present & clear

Notes: Since the text is written specifically for the spiritual benefit of monks, it sharply distinguishes monks and laity. According to the text, a monk is described as one who strictly controls his nature and unceasingly watches over his senses; keeps his body in chastity, his mouth pure and his mind illumined.

↳ Are specifically moral norms prescribed by the text?

– Yes

Notes: The moral norms prescribed by the text concern the way in which a monk should walk the path to perfection, hence the imagery of the Ladder: if one fails to climb one step, he will not be able to move on to the next.

↳ Specifically moral norms are implicitly linked to vague metaphysical concepts

– Yes

↳ Moral norms are explicitly linked to vague metaphysical entities

– No

↳ Linked to impersonal cosmic order (e.g. karma)

– No

↳ Linked in some way to an anthropomorphic being

– No

↳ Specifically moral norms are linked explicitly to commands of anthropomorphic being

– No

↳ Specifically moral norms are have no (sic: have no?) special connection to the metaphysical

– No

↳ Moral norms apply to (select all that apply)

– Only specialized religious class

Are there centrally important virtues advocated by the text?

– Yes

↳ Honesty/trustworthiness/integrity

– Yes

↳ Courage (in battle)

– No

↳ Courage (generic)

– Yes

Notes: The text refers to cowardice, which is considered to be the offspring of vainglory and a falling away from faith, as a result of the expectation of unexpected misfortunes.

↳ Compassion/empathy/kindness/benevolence

– Yes

↳ Mercy/forgiveness/tolerance

– Yes

↳ Generosity/charity

– Yes

↳ Selflessness/selfless giving

– Yes

↳ Righteousness/moral rectitude

– Yes

↳ Ritual purity/ritual adherence/abstention from sources of impurity

– Yes

↳ Respectfulness/courtesy

– Yes

↳ Familial obedience/filial piety

– Yes

Notes: But only in a metaphorical manner, in the context of the relationship between the spiritual guide (Abbot) and the monk.

↳ Fidelity/loyalty

– Yes

↳ Cooperation

– No

↳ Independence/creativity/freedom

– No

↳ Moderation/frugality

– Yes

↳ Forbearance/fortitude/patience

– Yes

↳ Diligence/self-discipline/excellence

– Yes

↳ Assertiveness/decisiveness/confidence/initiative

– No

↳ Strength (physical)

– No

↳ Power/status/nobility

– Yes

Notes: These qualities are connected with forms of vainglory.

↳ Humility/modesty

– Yes

↳ Contentment/serenity/equanimity

– Yes

Notes: The text refers to "solitude of the body and soul", i.e. a kind of serenity. It is described as a state of knowing and reducing the habits and feelings of the body, while serenity of the soul implies the knowledge of one's thoughts and an inviolable mind.

↳ Joyfulness/enthusiasm/cheerfulness

– Yes

Notes: However, joyfulness is connected here with mourning and repentance. Mourning, according to the text, is a golden spur in the soul, which is stripped of all attachment and of all ties, fixed by holy sorrow to watch over the heart. Repentance is the cheerful deprivation of every bodily comfort.

↳ Optimism/hope

– Yes

Notes: According to the text, hope makes someone immune to disappointment.

↳ Gratitude/thankfulness

– Yes

↳ Reverence/awe/wonder

– Yes

↳ Faith/belief/trust/devotion

– Yes

↳ Wisdom/understanding

– Yes

↳ Discernment/intelligence

– Yes

↳ Beauty/attractiveness

– Yes

Notes: However with negative connotations.

↳ Cleanliness (physical)/orderliness

– Field doesn't know

↳ Other important virtues

– Yes

Notes: The most important virtue, according to the text, is love. Love is considered to be a resemblance to God. Love is essentially the banishment of every kind of contrary thought for love thinks no evil.

Advocacy of Practices

Does the text require celibacy (full sexual abstinence)?

– Yes

Does the text require constraints on sexual activity (partial sexual abstinence)?

– No

Notes: The text presupposes full sexual abstinence.

Does the text require castration?

– No

Does the text require fasting?

– Yes

Does the text require forgone food opportunities (taboos on desired foods)?

– Yes

Notes: The text strongly recommends abstinence from overeating, fasting and abstinence, considering gluttony as the prince of passions. It also advises to give the stomach satisfying and digestible food, so

as to satisfy its insatiable hunger by sufficiency, and so that one may be delivered from excessive desire, as from a scourge, by quick assimilation.

Does the text require permanent scarring or painful bodily alterations?

– No

Does the text require painful physical positions or transitory painful wounds?

– No

Does the text require sacrifice of adults?

– No

Does the text require sacrifice of children?

– No

Does the text require self-sacrifice (suicide)?

– No

Does the text require sacrifice of property/valuable items?

– Yes

Notes: It is imperative that the monk must renounce all things, despise, deride, and shake off all things that they may lay a firm foundation with the "world", that is with his previous life. Material things such as fortune, holdings etc are obstacles in a monks' path, since they constitute a bond with anything secular.

Does the text require sacrifice of time (e.g. attendance at meetings or services, regular prayer, etc.)?

– Yes

Does the text require physical risk taking?

– No

Does the text require accepting ethical precepts?

– Yes

Does the text require marginalization by out-group members?

– No

Does the text require participation in small-scale rituals (private, household)?

– Yes



What is the average interval of time between performances?

– Field doesn't know

Does the text require participation in large-scale rituals?

– Field doesn't know

Are extra-ritual in-group markers present as indicated in the text?

– No

Does the text employ fictive kinship terminology?

– No

Does the text include elements that are intended to be entertaining?

– No

Does the text specify sacrifices, offerings, and maintenance of a sacred space?

– Field doesn't know

Institutions & Production Environment of Text

Society & Institutions

Society of religious group that produced the text is best characterized as:

– Other

Notes: Monastic community, anchorites.

Are there specific elements of society that have controlled the reproduction of the text?

– Other

Notes: Monastic communities have contributed to the extensive study, copy, translation and distribution of the text.

Are there specific elements of society involved with the destruction of the text?

– Other

Welfare

Does the text specify institutionalized famine relief?

– No

Does the text specify institutionalized poverty relief?

– No

Does the text specify institutionalized care for elderly & infirm?

– No

Other forms of welfare?

– No

Education

Are there formal educational institutions available for teaching the text?

– No

Are there formal educational institutions specified according to the text?

– No

Does the text make provisions for non-religious education?

– No

Does the text restrict education to religious professionals?

– No

Does the text restrict education among religious professionals?

– No

Is education gendered according to the text?

– No

Is education gendered with respect to this text and larger textual tradition?

– No

Does the text specify teaching relationships or ratios? (i.e.: 1:20; 1:1)

– No

Are there specific relationships to teachers that are advocated by the text?

– No

Are there worldly rewards/benefits to education according to the text specified by the text itself?

– No

Bureaucracy

Is bureaucracy regulated by this text?

– No

Public Works

Does the text detail interaction with public works?

– No

Taxation

Does the text specify forms of taxation?

– No

Warfare

Does the text mention warfare?

– No

Food Production

Does the text mentioned food production/disbursement?

– No

Bibliography

General References

Reference: Henrik Johnsén Rydell. Reading John Climacus: Rhetorical Argumentation, Literary Convention and the Tradition of Monastic Formation. Lund: Lund University, Centre for Theology and Religious Studies.

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