Holy Mountain(s) in Byzantium and Beyond
edited by Antonio Rigo, Berenice Cavarra, Gianfrancesco Zanetti

Holy Mountains of the Byzantine East and Mystical Experience (Ninth-Fourteenth c.)

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Abstract Between the ninth and fourteenth centuries such mountains as Olympos in Bithynia, Galesion in W. Asia Minor, and especially Athos in Macedonia became important centres of ascetic and communal life. Inspired by biblical mountains, particularly Sinai and Tabor, they were regarded as sacred spaces where monks could approach God and experience divine presence. Byzantine hagiography frequently associates holy ascetics with visions of supernatural light, following the example of Moses on Mt. Sinai. Ioannikios, Lazaros of Galesion, and Gregorios of Sinai were among the saints who illustrated this tradition. Nevertheless, mystical experience was not a privilege for those living in isolation on mountains but extended to holy persons who dwelt in the city or the countryside and were distinguished for their spiritual life.

Keywords Mt. Sinai. Moses. Athos. Mt. Olympos (Bithynia). Mt. Galesion. Mt. Latros (W. Asia Minor). Divine light. Hesychasm.

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Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Byzantine Studies 2
e-ISSN 3103-7003 | ISSN 3103-8220
ISBN [ebook] 979-12-5742-071-0 | ISBN [print] 979-12-5742-072-7

Peer review | Open access
Submitted 2026-05-25 | Accepted 2026-07-06 | Published 2026-11-11
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DOI 10.30687/979-12-5742-071-0/002

1 Introduction

Holy mountains in the Byzantine East would have been home to ascetics seeking to build their nests of isolation and the places in which groups of monastics would settle to lead a communal life. If holy mountains are a rather small chapter in the history of late antique monasticism, known to have taken root and flourished largely in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine and Syria, they are nonetheless central to understanding the development of monasticism and grasping its character and related activities after the loss of these provinces in the mid-seventh century. Mount Athos, previously sparsely inhabited by hermits, but later a monastic polity and finally hosting all kinds of anchoritism, epitomises the history of all the other holy mountains that, from the fifth century onwards, saw the gradual establishment of monastic communities in their formerly uninhabited surroundings.[1] Indeed, the history of the development of Mt. Athos as a monastic centre can be closely related to that of the monastic colonies that ultimately emerged in the heartlands of the post-late antique empire, first in Asia Minor, then in the Balkans. I am referring to Mounts Auxentios and Olympos which saw their first monastics settled on their soil in the fifth century, Kyminas and Latros in the tenth, Galesion in the eleventh, and other later ones in the Balkan peninsula (Ganos, Paroria, Meteora, etc.), all undoubtedly less high-profile than Mt. Athos.[2]

Parallel to their geographical and historical contexts, as religious sites and landscapes, holy mountains by default evoked biblical reminiscences by virtue of the holy figures that they had hosted and the associations these had summoned up with episodes from the Old and New Testament. The Old Testament's Mt. Horeb, which came to be identified with Mt. Sinai, Mt. Carmel, where Elijah performed his miracles, and the New Testament's Mt. Tabor, the site of Jesus' Transfiguration, stand out as exempla that could be variously explored in Christian writings. In fact, if seen as a sequence of events leading to a dramatic culmination, Jesus's life can be plotted from the mountain where he defeated the Devil's temptations to the Mount of Beatitudes, the Mount of Feeding the 5,000 (most likely Mt. Arbel), Mt. Tabor, and the Mount of Olives, ending on Golgotha, the site of the Crucifixion.[3] Thus, as sites of theophany in every sense of the word, biblical mountains in Christian literature were cited either as corroboration of the lofty and sacred character of mountains as such or as confirmation

1 On this topic still valuable is Papachryssanthou 1975, 2-41.

2 On these mountains see in general Talbot 2024.

3 Della Dora 2016, 148-9.

of the supernatural qualities of the saintly figures who dwelt on them, devoting themselves to prayer and all kinds of ascetic practice.

In keeping with the first of these two usages or perceptions, the enigmatic author known as Dionysios the Areopagite (or Pseudo-Dionysios) introduces his treatise *On Mystical Theology* with an invocation to the Holy Trinity:

> to lead us up beyond unknowing and light, up to the farthest, highest peak of mystic scripture, where the mysteries of God's Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.[4]

In fact, this "highest peak of mystic scripture" can be identified as Mt. Sinai as will be brought out in a later chapter of the *Mystical Theology* in which Pseudo-Dionysios will refer to Moses' ascent into the darkness of God. "When he is separated from the many and together with the chosen priests, he attains the summit of the divine ascent" and "is united by the cessation of all knowledge to God".[5] This famous passage is key to understanding the potential, so to speak, of a mystical experience and how a holy mountain can be the place *par excellence* where, as Pseudo-Dionysios puts it, "not God himself may be seen (for he cannot be beheld), but the place, where He is".[6]

2 Lofty Spiritual Pursuits and Moses' Experience on Mt. Sinai

The theme or motif that any lofty spiritual pursuit plausibly admits a comparison with Moses' experience on Mt. Sinai recurs in a broad range of texts and, as such, is noteworthy. Even before the end of late antiquity, Symeon the Stylite the Elder's choice to live on a pillar is modelled upon this precise exemplum. In his *Syriac Life* (*BHO* 1121) the saint is characterised as "a new Moses, dispensing from his new Mount Sinai (i.e. his pillar) the new Law for God". Evidently, what is implied here is that his awkward ascetic practice must be understood in the light of a biblical tradition, i.e. in claiming a biblical precedent, and in respect of Symeon's belief that God wanted him to be his earthly mouthpiece. It is no coincidence that the stylite's other

4 Ch. 1, ed. Heil, Ritter 1991, 141-2.

5 Ch. 1.3, ed. Heil, Ritter 1991, 144.

6 Ch. 1.3, ed. Heil, Ritter 1991, 143:18-144:15.

model is none other than Elijah, in turn highlighting Symeon's call to advocate for the poor and the oppressed.[7]

Many centuries later, in a period far removed from the late antique clash between Christianity and paganism, we encounter much more daring associations with Moses' experience on Mt. Sinai. In his well-known apologetic letter addressed to the former patriarch John Xiphilinos (ep. 202), Michael Psellos will contend that Mt. Sinai should be regarded as some sort of physical mountain that led Moses up and God down. Or rather, according to his Platonic interpretation, Mt. Sinai is a symbol for the ascent of the soul out of matter.[8] A century later, towards the end of the year 1182, Michael Choniates will introduce himself as archbishop of Athens in an *Inaugural Address* in which he goes on to make an amazing comparison between the Parthenon and its burning light and Moses' experience on Mount Sinai. Declaring the Atheniotissa church and the hill of the Acropolis to be a locus of theophany, Choniates argues rhetorically that it is on this awesome place that the supercelestial light pours down and shines eternally. This is the light that burns inside the Christian Parthenon, and, to further highlight its significance, Choniates fills his narrative with qualitative epithets starting with either privative alpha or the adverbial prefix ἀεί, 'ever': ἀκάματον, οὐκ ἀμαυρούμενον ἡμέρας, οὐ διακοπτόμενον νυκτί, ἄξυλον, ἄϋλον, ἀκραιφνέστατον, ἀειλαμπές, ἀειφανής.[9] Besides employing terms from apophatic theology, which hark back to Pseudo-Dionysios and other early authors, he further asserts that it (i.e. the Parthenon) is a pillar of fire and the rain that falls from what we call the mystical and light-containing cloud (τῆς καθ' ἡμᾶς μυστικῆς καὶ φωτοδόχου νεφέλης ἀπόρροια), by which we may reach the promised land and the metropolis of the first-born, i.e. Paradise. What is more, he reserves for himself the mission of the one who ascended Mt. Horeb with his flock and gazed upon a burning bush, where he heard a resonant, divine voice urging him to move on from that place and inherit the Promised Land.[10]

Confronted, as we are, in both Psellos and Choniates with this bold attempt at reconciling two conflicting traditions, no doubt motivated by the archbishop of Athens' infatuation with Greek erudition, we get a clear idea of the symbolic dimensions that a biblical holy mountain, especially Mt. Sinai, could acquire and of the mystical experiences

7 See chs 79, 82, 112-13, 117; ed. Bedjan 1894, 571, 573-4, 617-8, 621-2; transl. Hilgenfeld 1908, 126, 128, 160-1, 164. Cf. Ashbrook Harvey 1988, 381-6; Efthymiadis 2026, 861-2.

8 See ed. Papaioannou 2019, 539: "τὸ δὲ Σίναιον [...] οὐχ ὡς αἰσθητὸν ὄρος ἀνάγει Μωσέα καὶ κατάγει θεόν, ἀλλ' ὡς συμβολικὸν τῆς κατὰ ψυχὴν ἀπὸ τῆς ὕλης ἐπάρσεως". For an English transl. see Kaldellis 2015, 173.

9 See ed. Lampros 1879, *passim*.

10 On this text and its language inspired by mystical theology see Efthymiadis 2012.

that it was, as it were, prone to generate. This exceptional association was not unknown in other writings but was never articulated in such bold terms as, for instance, in Michael Choniates' erudite composition. The idiosyncratic *Vita of David, Symeon and Georgios*, i.e. the one that honours the three saintly brothers from Lesbos who defended the veneration of icons, can offer a similar but far less high-minded example of inspiration from Greek antiquity. We hear of David, the eldest of the three brothers, practising *askesis* on Mt. Ida in Bithynia. According to the hagiographer, who confused Mt. Ida near Troy with the homonymous place on Crete that was said to be the birthplace of Zeus, David 'settled there so that this very place that the Greeks claimed in myth to be the home of Zeus might accurately be called the abode of a divine man and the sacred precinct of holy souls'.[11] However interesting, this apostrophe is rather parenthetical, merely suggesting that the mountain where David chose to follow his spiritual path had enjoyed a sacred reputation in antiquity.[12]

3 Sacred Mountains Revealing a Person's Holiness

Apart from being endowed with biblical overtones, sacred mountains were revealing of a person's holiness and/or of his/her spiritual gifts, more often than not, manifested through the performance of miracles. More significantly, it was a privilege reserved to a select few holy monastics to have their presence on a mountain associated with a mystical experience, which was usually recorded by an external or accidental witness. Ioannes Moschos in his *Pratum Spirituale*, which circulated after his death in ca. 620, relates the story of an anchorite found in a cave on Mt. Amanon in the vicinity of Antioch in Syria.[13] The narrator saw him kneeling on the ground with his hands stretched out to the heavens and the hair of his head reaching down to the floor. The author thought that the recluse was alive, but, as he heard from another ascetic living in a cave nearby, the anchorite had by then been dead for fifteen years. He looked, however, as if he had died no more than an hour before.[14] Put together in this extraordinary episode, mountain and cave make the ideal setting for keeping epiphanies of divinity and holiness away from the sight and out of reach of the many. Moreover, for all its brevity and thanks to the way it is embedded, the story succeeds in conveying the dual character of the mystical

11 Ch. 5, ed. van den Gheyn 1899, 215; English transl. 156. Comments on this passage by Talbot 2024, 93-4.

12 See the comments of Talbot 2024, 93-4.

13 On this mountain see Hild, Hellenkemper 1990, 174-6.

14 Ch. 89, *PG* 87/3, 2945C-2948A; English transl. Wortley 1992, 71-2.

experience implied for the ascetic found in a statuesque position. In the first place, the story offers one of many examples of hidden or secret sanctity, so common in late antique hagiography; the ascetic's holiness had to remain undisclosed for fifteen years until the witness who ultimately attested it emerged. In the second place, the story bears witness to an epiphany, i.e. a manifestation of the divine in a living person, not directly experienced but mediated by other persons, another ascetic and the narrator. In a sense, the latter's testimony was essential to the uncovering of this extraordinary experience.

In the hagiography produced in the iconoclastic and post-iconoclastic eras the theme of hidden or secret sanctity receded.[15] Whether involved in contemporary controversies or not, new saints were portrayed in a more realistic light, which means that the historical perspective was allotted much more space in the narrative than had previously been the case.[16] Nonetheless, in such a change of perspective of a saint's biography, miraculous accounts were still a necessary element for dispelling any doubt about his/her holy identity. This applied to monastic saints *par excellence*, especially the ones who lived in isolation on the holy mountains that are of interest to us.

The case of St Ioannikios, also referred to as Ioannikios the Great, deserves special attention. After a rather unsuccessful career in the army, he spent the last fifty years of his life on Mt. Olympos in Bithynia. One might say that, of all the holy monastics of his time, Ioannikios was the one who most obviously enjoyed acclaim in his lifetime in that his holiness and miraculous activity were widely acknowledged well before his passing in 846 at the age of 93. In other words, Ioannikios' sanctity needed no posthumous revelation to confirm it. The fact that two biographies were produced consecutively in his honour is another indication of his popularity, at least among the iconophile circles that gained the upper hand following the death of Emperor Theophilos in 842. Now, a feature that clearly distinguishes the earliest *Life*, written by the monk Peter, from the later one by the monk Sabas is that Ioannikios is not portrayed there merely as a wonderworker performing miraculous acts that benefit other people or as a charismatic figure predicting events of major importance for the empire. On more than one occasion, Ioannikios is represented by Peter as radiating divine light. Moreover, in the *vita*'s preamble, by virtue of his residing on Mt. Olympos, he is introduced as

> the one who slipped into the darkness of divine grace and like Moses on the mountain received tablets, not with his hands, but

15 On this common theme in late antique hagiography see now van Pelt 2025.

16 See Efthymiadis, forthcoming.

> with his mind, with the finger of the spirit, and gave laws to the people through his actions.[17]

Again, when, in his final days, he was visited by Patriarch Methodios and had to preach against the Stoudites who opposed them, the patriarch is said to 'have climbed down from the mountain initiated into the mysteries, carrying back, as if from a second Moses, spiritual tablets written by God, the teachings of the saint'.[18]

No such theologically eloquent pronouncements can be found in the *vita* by the monk Sabas. By contrast, some decades before the two biographies were composed, Ioannikios' mystical charismas were acknowledged by one who, we hear, opposed his monastic paradigm. This is none other than Theodore the Stoudite who, in a letter addressed to 'Ioannikios the hermit' (Ἰωαννικίῳ ἐρημίτῃ) and dated to the year 823, i.e. after the two monastics met on Mt. Olympos, appears generous in his praise: 'we greatly enjoyed seeing a man of God, God's grace shining on his face and in his speech and calling for rendering glory to God. You got this thanks to your hermitic isolation and your adherence to prayer, thus being illuminated on your face by the ineffable light as Moses was'.[19] Interestingly, in this instance, the Stoudite abbot, a staunch advocate of cenobitic monasticism, sees no problem in extolling the ascetic for his miraculous feats he performed by means of his eremitical retirement and constant prayer.

As in the case of the two biographers of St. Ioannikios who do not pay the same attention to their subject's mystical experiences, a similar dichotomy can be observed between the early anonymous biographers of St. Auxentios, a fifth-century monastic, and Michael Psellos who extolled the same saint in the eleventh century. St. Auxentios stands out as the only saint whose name was given to the mountain (Mt Oxia in Bithynia across from Constantinople) on which he practised askesis.[20] Whereas no such description appears in any of the earlier pieces that make up the saint's relatively rich hagiographical dossier, Psellos takes the liberty of adding a full account of the ecstatic vision Auxentios experienced not long before his passing. It seemed to the holy man that the air was filled with light, and, as he came to realize, a host of angels were facing him while an unidentified figure emerged out of the darkness. Subsequently, thanks to a voice coming from the air, this person was identified as

17 See ch. 2, ed. Polemis, Mineva 2021, 363-4; also, *AASS* Nov. II, 385. English transl. Sullivan 1998, 257.

18 See ch. 71, ed. Polemis, Mineva 2021, 437-8; also, *AASS* Nov. II, 432. English transl., Sullivan 1998, 344.

19 See ep. 461, ed. Fatouros 1992, 657-8.

20 On this mountain, see Belke 2020, 438-41.

Symeon Stylites. Psellos specifies that, when Auxentios shared this experience with the assembly of his fellow monks, they all marveled at the power of his virtue, which enabled him, while still in bodily form, to be reckoned among the immaterial orders. As some of them later found out, Auxentios's vision had occurred at the very moment when Symeon departed this life.[21] No obvious answer can be given to the question why Psellos wove this story of ecstatic experience into his *vita* and made analogies between the two famous, late antique holy ascetics. If we give credit to Alexander Kazhdan's contention that this whole piece was an attempt at auto-hagiography on Psellos's part and that it reflected his personal ambitions,[22] it may be inferred that he was merely endorsing the benefits of withdrawing from public life in Constantinople and retiring to the monastic abodes in the mountains on the Asiatic shore, a challenge that he was about to take up or had already taken up earlier in life.

A saint who was Psellos' contemporary and, like Auxentios, pursued his monastic career on a mountain was Lazaros of Mt. Galesion. His case deserves some attention in that, once he took up residence on that mountain, he made it a priority to make it a holy site.[23] This holiness was demarcated by Lazaros's own ascetic paradigm and was showcased by the practice of stylitism. By imitating the example of late antique stylites Lazaros both attracted visitors to his column and encouraged many local people to take monastic vows and join a community under his spiritual guidance. Several of his visitors bore witness to supernatural phenomena in relation to the presence of St. Lazaros on his column. For instance, the monk Nikephoros related that, while he was heading from the church to his cell at dusk, he saw the dome of the church surrounded by fire. From there the fire spread uncontrollably and engulfed the column of the saint.[24] Moreover, when the strategos Romanos Skleros, one of the saint's visitors, climbed the stylite's column, he saw the face of the saint shining like fire, a vision that temporarily blinded him and forced him to go back.[25] This vision recalls a similar one that occurred on Mt. Latros, also in Western Asia Minor, a century before St. Lazaros' lifetime. It was witnessed by St. Paul of Latros soon after he was introduced to Peter, abbot of Karya, a famous local monastic who attested to the holiness of the mountain. According to his anonymously preserved

21 See ch. 32, ed. Varalda 2014, 46-8.

22 Kazhdan 1983, 546-56.

23 Cf. Veikou 2023, 20-1.

24 See ch. 86, ed. Delehaye 1910, 535-6; English transl. Greenfield 2000, 177.

25 See ch. 87, ed. Delehaye 1910, 536; English transl. Greenfield 2000, 177-8.

vita (*BHG* 1474), Paul saw him in his cell, appearing like a fiery pillar, a vision which he too could not face for long.[26]

4 Mystical Experience in the Age of Hesychasm

All these themes and topics will gain currency at the dawn of the fourteenth century which saw the rise and gradual expansion of the Hesychastic movement, which radiated out from a central hub on Mt. Athos. This form of devotion recommended repeating the Jesus Prayer, while bending from the waist with head slightly inclined. This prayer posture was to be adopted when embarking on the ascetic-spiritual journey towards perfection.[27] Creating as, according to the teachings of the Hesychast Fathers, it does such psychophysical effects as 'exultation', 'leaping' and 'perturbation', this prayer posture, which evidently contrasts with the one recorded in the story of the *Pratum Spirituale*, paves the way to receiving the experience of light as seen in the Transfiguration of Christ on Mt. Tabor.

Contemporary hagiography provides a number of suggestive attestations to this experience of light. A first noteworthy example is provided in the extensive *Life* of one of the first prominent defenders of Hesychastic doctrine, namely Gregorios of Sinai (1255-1346), who lived into the first half of the fourteenth century. The narrative is built around Gregorios' successive moves from one place to another and especially dwells on his long stays in holy sites. The first of these is none other than Mt. Sinai and that is followed by Mt. Athos, regularly referred to as the Holy Mountain. Perhaps because of the young age of his subject, Patriarch Kallistos I, his biographer, refrains from attributing any ecstatic experience to him during his time on Mt. Sinai, the place where Gregorios was tonsured a monk. By contrast, in the section devoted to Mt. Athos, Kallistos does make reference to such an experience. Gregorios, we are told, joined the Sketis of Magoula, situated opposite the monastery of Philotheou, and took three monks under his guidance. No sooner had he pronounced the Jesus Prayer and shed tears on the ground than his abode was filled with light, a light that, as we hear, never abandoned him.[28]

Yet more *Lives* of Hesychast saints are infused with descriptions of visions of the divine light and/or of participation in the life to come while still living. For instance, Philotheos Kokkinos describes the mystical experience that his teacher Gregorios Palamas had during Holy Week while a resident of the Lavra of St. Sabas, i.e.

26 See ch. 4, ed. Delehaye 1913, 107.

27 On the posture used for prayer see lately Rigo 2023.

28 Ch. 12, ed. Beyer 2006, 132. On Gregorios Sinaites see, *inter alia*, Rigo 2002.

Hilandar. Prior to that, Philotheos inserts a long extract on divine illumination taken from Palamas' own *Antirrheticus*.[29] In turn, in his *Life of Maximos the Hutburner* (*BHG* 1237), Theophanes of Vatopedi gives a detailed account of the visionary experiences of his hero (1272/85-1367/80). Interestingly enough, these experiences occurred after Maximos chose to pursue the solitary life, leaving the cenobium of Megisti Lavra and taking up residence on the slopes of Mt. Athos. Among the various Hesychastic practices recorded in his *Life* was an ascent to the peak of Athos itself, where he had a vision in which he saw the Virgin Mary granting him power over demons as well as heavenly bread for his nourishment and recovery.[30]

5 Conclusions

Mountains are spiritual spaces *par excellence*. Although no Byzantine author other than Nikephoros Gregoras in his *Roman History* painted a holy mountain as a *locus amoenus* for the solitary life and retirement from the world,[31] mountains were by and large envisioned as such in the common mind. For those attracted by this way of life, they operated as 'innocent' sites untouched by the secularisation that affected Christians living in the world.[32] What is more, mountains could represent a 'transcendental space', i.e. a spot essential for a human being to be in direct contact with the divine and be granted mystical experiences.

This 'transcendental space', however, was not only the privilege of those who retired to mountains, holy or otherwise. Symeon the New Theologian, nowadays regarded as the most acclaimed mystic of the Middle Byzantine period and highly influential in the Hesychastic movement, was the frequent recipient of such mystical experiences while residing in the monastery of Saint Mamas in a neighborhood of Constantinople.[33] Clearly, by having these experiences within the confines of his monastery, in church or in his cell, he endorsed their ubiquity, i.e. that they might occur in any place sanctified by the presence of a holy person. As has been calculated, these episodes occupy approximately one third of Symeon's *Life*.[34] In the early

29 See respectively chs. 34 and 32, ed. Tsames 1985, 465-6 and 460-4.

30 See ch. 9, ed. Greenfield, Talbot 2016, 472-8.

31 See book XIV.7, ed. Schopen 1830, 714-8. On Gregoras's preoccupation with mountains in general see Lounghis 1990, 47-8.

32 Della Dora 2016, 147-75.

33 See e.g. chs. 69-70, 117, 126-7, ed. Koutsas 2005, 188-91, 292-4, 316-21; English transl., Greenfield 2013, 154-8, 274-6, 302-6.

34 Veikou 2023, 64.

thirteenth century, another ascetic Father, Neophytos the Recluse in Cyprus, would borrow a saying from John Chrysostom and expand it accordingly in his *Testamentary Rule* (Τυπική Διαθήκη):

> it is not the place but the manner [of living] with [the help of] God which saves man. For if the place on its own and without the manner saved man, the angels would not have fallen from heaven, our forefathers would not have fallen from paradise, Judas would not have become a traitor to the apostolic company.[35]

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35 Ch. 12: ὅτι οὐχ ὁ τόπος ἀλλ' ὁ τρόπος μετὰ Θεὸν σῴζει τὸν ἄνθρωπον. Εἰ γὰρ τρόπου χωρὶς ἔσῳζε τόπος, οὐκ ἂν ἐξ οὐρανοῦ ἐξέπεσον ἄγγελοι, οὐκ ἂν ἐξέπεσον τοῦ παραδείσου ἡμῶν οἱ προπάτορες, οὐκ ἂν ἐξ ἀποστολικῆς φάλαγγος προδότης Ἰούδας ἐγένετο. English transl., Galatariotou 2000, 1356. The same expression is in Neophytos's *Fourth Homily on Christ's Commandments*, ch. 43, ed. Stephanis 1996, 65. The allusion is to John Chrysostom's Homily VI *Ad populum Antiochenum* (*CPG* 4330), ch. 4, *PG* 49, 87: ἵνα μάθῃς, ὅτι οὐχὶ τόπος, ἀλλὰ τρόπος σωτηρίαν φέρει καὶ κόλασιν, οἱ ἔνδον διέφυγον, οἱ ἔξω διεφθάρησαν.

John Chrysostom. Homily VI *Ad populum Antiochenum* (*CPG* 4330), *PG* 49, 81-92.

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