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Climbing Sinai, Ascending the Ladder
The Mountain as Spiritual Paradigm in John Climacus

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Abstract In Climacus' *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, the dominant metaphor is the ladder inspired by Jacob's dream (Gen 28,10-17). Yet although the thirty discourses rarely name Sinai directly, the mountain becomes the figure through which the work was originally framed and subsequently read. Composed within the Sinaitic context, the *Ladder* carries traces of this setting that extend well beyond its explicit references, surfacing instead in the textual and visual frameworks that came to surround it. This article follows that figure across several interconnected sites of reception: the paratextual material associated with Raithou, the manuscript imagery of the *Tabula retrograda*, the iconography and text of the *Canon katanyktikos*, and the layered allegorical language that closes the Discourse to the Shepherd. Read together, these sources show how the mountain functioned not merely as a backdrop to the *Ladder*'s composition but as an organizing figure for its ascetic vision – one that shaped how commentators, later readers, scribes, and artists understood the work's structure and spiritual aims. In tracing this figure through both text and image, the article argues for the mountain's full significance within the ascetic imagination the *Ladder* inspired.

Keywords Ladder of Divine Ascent. John Climacus. Spiritual Tablets. Tabula retrograda. Canon katanyktikos. Discourse to the Shepherd. Mount Sinai.

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1 Introduction

The mountain known as Horeb or Sinai stands at the very heart of the biblical narrative as the preeminent site of divine revelation. The Book of Exodus conveys the mountain's numinous theophanic power: "The mountain of Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire".[1] In Hebrew, the name 'Sinai' may derive from *seneh*, the burning bush, evoking an inscrutable divine presence.[2] The Epistle to the Galatians contrasts this mountain, associated with Hagar and the old covenant of slavery, with the freedom of the heavenly Jerusalem and the new covenant.[3]

By the fourth century, this remote place had already become home to a monastic community. The pilgrim Egeria, in her *Itinerary* (383-4), records a church on the holy summit and, at the site of the Burning Bush, a carefully tended garden with abundant water.[4] Shortly thereafter, an episcopal see was established at Pharan (modern Wadi Feiran), north of what would become Saint Catherine's Monastery. The diocese of Pharan extended across the entire Sinai region and included the important monastic centre at Raifa (modern Et-Tur).[5]

In the mid-fifth century, Theodoret of Cyrrhus provides the earliest narrative account of monastic life on the mountain. In his *Historia Philothea* (Vita 2, §13), he recounts how Julian, known locally as Saba, journeyed with a small group of companions to Sinai. Rather than settling in any city or village, he made the impassable desert accessible (τὴν ἄβατον ἔρημον βατὴν ἐργαζόμενος),[6] establishing a community of brothers in this sacred wilderness.

Procopius of Caesarea offers one of the most vivid descriptions of the Sinai region in his *De aedificiis* (Book 5, Chapter 8), a work devoted to Justinian's building projects.[7] Procopius portrays the area as lying in ancient Arabia, later known as Third Palestine: an extensive desert (χώρα ἔρημος), barren and devoid of fruits, water,

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1 Ex 19,18.

2 See Levenson 1985, 19-20.

3 Gal 4,24-25.

4 Cf. *Itinerarium Egeriae* 3.1-4.8; ed. Franceschini, Weber 1965, 37-40. See also Elsner, Wolf 2010, 47-9.

5 For a broader context on Pharan, Raifa, and early settlements, see e.g. Dahari 2000; Pierre-Beylot 2011.

6 See Canivet, Leroy-Molinghen 1977, 176-7 (Greek text with French translation).

7 It was at the emperor's initiative that the Sinai community received a fortified monastery, whose main structures were completed between 548 and 560.

or provisions, dominated by a steep and fiercely wild mountain (ὄρος ἀπότομόν τε καὶ δεινῶς ἄγριον) that stretches almost to the Red Sea.[8] This naturally inhospitable landscape became the setting onto which the monastic tradition projected a dense symbolic reading.

The mountain emerged as a privileged space for ascetic life, divine encounter, and spiritual transformation. Scholars have traced how this symbolism draws on a long tradition linking mountains with isolation, refuge, and elevation – both literal and metaphorical – turning harsh wilderness into a new paradise and a restored Eden.[9]

This paper examines John of Sinai's *Ladder* through selected key passages, particularly those in the framing sections of the work, and through the rich evidence of its reception in the Byzantine manuscript tradition. Three main threads guide the analysis. (1) The composition of the work is intimately linked to Sinai. The redactors at Raithou framed the core ascetic discourses of the Sinaitic hegumen with a network of paratexts that present the book itself as issued from the holy mountain. (2) The *Tabula retrograda*, the inverted index of the thirty steps, invites a visual and symbolic assimilation. Positioned between earth and heaven, the ladder in this table evokes the mountain without depicting it. Concrete illustrations of physical mountains appear, however, only in connection with the *Canon katanyktikos* (Canon of the Penitents), transmitted in several manuscripts. In these miniatures, monks are shown either at the base or on the peaks of the mountains, engaged in specific practices of ascetic humility and compunction. (3) The final part of the concluding *Discourse to the Shepherd* brings the mountain imagery to its fullest expression. Here the spiritual guide moves gradually from Horeb through successive symbolic heights until reaching the holy mountain, encompassing models and images drawn from both the Old and New Testaments. In this ultimate section, the physical and spiritual mountains converge with the ladder of virtues itself, presenting the ascetic life as a single, continuous climb toward divine union.

2 The Composition of the *Ladder*: Sinai, Raithou, and the *Plakes*

Sinai is both a biblical place and a part of the monastic pair Sinai–Raithou from which the *Ladder* was requested and composed. The analysis that follows is concerned less with a mountain allegory running through every step than with the editorial context and

8 For the Greek text, see Wirth 1964, 159-60. On the Justinianic construction, see also Ševčenko 2006.

9 See, for example, Della Dora 2016, 147-202; Talbot 2001, esp. 264, 275.

reception history of the book. The choice of Sinai as the setting of the *Ladder* carries deep significance. It is the biblical mountain par excellence – the site of Moses' theophany and the giving of the Law, when the prophet received the stone tablets (*plakes*).[10] The author is known as John of Sinai from his office as hegumen of the monastery on the holy mountain; the name Climacus (ὁ τῆς Κλίμακος) derives from the title of this book. The community of Raithou played a decisive role in presenting John of Sinai's work as a text profoundly rooted in this holy mountain. This emphasis on its Sinaitic origin is clearly visible in the elaborate paratextual framework that surrounds the core discourses in the manuscript corpus.[11]

The composite structure of the *Ladder* took shape in three main stages. First comes the letter from John, hegumen of Raithou, requesting the work from John, hegumen of Sinai. This is followed by the main body of the treatise – the *Ascetic Discourses*, including the final and structurally appended *Discourse to the Shepherd* – accompanied by an epilogue. Finally, a series of supplementary pieces were added: the *Life* of John Climacus, the *Tabula retrograda*, along with various titles, concluding formulas, and an exhortative epilogue. These additions were designed to refine and complete the text as it was received at Raithou.

This redactional choice carries important implications for interpreting the mountain of Sinai as a spiritual paradigm. It suggests that the ascent described in the *Ladder* truly begins only after the Sinaitic setting and Mosaic typology have been firmly established. The reader is thus invited to approach the thirty steps as a path unfolding directly on the sacred ground of Sinai.

In his letter, John of Raithou compares John of Sinai to Moses and figuratively describes the work as "tablets written by God" (πλάκας θεογράφους) and "precious inscriptions engraved on the tablets" (τίμια ταῖς πλαξὶν ἐγχαράγματα).[12] Just as the prophet Moses spoke through the mouth of Aaron, John of Sinai conveys his teaching through the intermediary of John of Raithou. This collaborative dimension is essential for understanding the *Ladder*. The work is not the solitary achievement of a Sinaitic ascetic, but a text born from

10 See Ex 31-34.

11 On the relationships between Sinai and Raithou in the composition and paratextual framing of the *Ladder*, see Venetskov 2018; 2019; 2020; 2025. The present study takes a different object: the mountain as a figure that organises the book's frames, its manuscript imagery, and its later reading. A forthcoming monograph by the same author examines the composition of the *Ladder* and its scalary imagery at greater length; it does not replace the argument developed here.

12 *Letter* of John of Raithou, PG 88, 624B:7; 625A:12-B:1. See also the *Reply* of John of Sinai, where he likewise refers to the 'tablets' (πλακῶν) in connection with the 'spiritual law' (νόμου πνευματικοῦ) intended for monks (PG 88, 625A:15-B:1). Cf. Venetskov 2025, 178.

dialogue between two monastic communities and carefully prepared for wider dissemination. The exchange between Raithou and Sinai strengthens the image of the mountain as a living spiritual paradigm. The *Ladder* emerges directly from the soil of Sinai, shaped by its rugged geography and the ascetic tradition that had long flourished across Egypt, Palestine, and the surrounding regions.

In the great majority of manuscripts of the *Ladder* (Κλίμαξ), John of Sinai's work bears a second, evocative title: Πλάκες πνευματικαί (Spiritual Tablets). This designation rarely appears at the opening of the book. Instead, often written in capital letters, it is typically placed before John of Sinai's *Reply* to the abbot of Raithou. When it recurs at the end of the *Reply*, it forms part of a concluding formula that marks the close of the introductory section, clearly distinguishing it from the thirty discourses that follow. Unlike the title Κλίμαξ, the placement of Πλάκες πνευματικαί makes it difficult to regard it as an overarching title for the entire work. Nevertheless, the concluding formula explicitly presents Πλάκες πνευματικαί as the proper name (ἐπωνυμία) of John of Sinai's writing.[13]

The dual titles enrich the mountain paradigm that runs through Climacus' thought. While the *Ladder* draws on the imagery of vertical ascent, *Spiritual Tablets* anchors the work firmly in the biblical and geographical reality of Mount Sinai. The *Ascetic Discourses* thus present themselves as a new law, modelled on the tablets Moses received on the holy mountain. John the hegumen becomes the new Moses, the lawgiver for his monastic community, and the divine commandments are reinterpreted as the guiding principles of ascetic discipline. The stone tablets are transformed into a living spiritual book, offered to ascetics for reading, reflection, and daily practice.

In the opening paragraph of Step 1, the author describes how the spiritual lawgiver inscribes the divine words upon the "tablets of the heart", thereby extending the assimilation of the *Ladder* to Mount Sinai and the biblical Tablets of the Law. He explains that he has traced these words on hearts as if on parchment or paper (μεμβράναις / χάρταις) or, more fittingly, on spiritual tablets (μᾶλλον δὲ πλάκαις / πλαξὶ πνευματικαῖς).[14]

A curious case appears in a series of manuscripts, where this introductory paragraph is followed by a marginal rubric ἀρχή (beginning).[15] This note signals that the authentic beginning authored

13 See especially Venetskov 2025, 176-80. The suggestion that Πλάκες πνευματικαί is the older title compared to Κλίμαξ (cf. Duffy 1999, 5-6) finds no support in the manuscript evidence: both titles appear together in the earliest complete witnesses.

14 Cf. *PG* 88, 632C:10-633A:1. It echoes 2 Cor 3,3.

15 For instance: Vat. Ottob. gr. 256 (12th c.), f. 7v; Paris. gr. 863 (11th c.), f. 7v; Hierosol. Sab. 175 (year 1292), f. 10r; Vat. Barb. gr. 309 (11th c.), f. 12v (hand A).

by John of Sinai starts only with the systematic classification of "all those who have the power of choice" (πάντων τῶν προαιρουμένων).[16] The scribal intervention, which appears as a model across a group of manuscripts, suggests that the first paragraph serves primarily as a paratextual framing device rather than as the original core of the composition. By distinguishing this prologue from the true start of the thirty steps, the Raithou-influenced tradition reinforces a crucial idea: the *Ladder* as a spiritual law issued from Sinai. The mountain thus stands as the authoritative source of the new ascetic legislation, with John Climacus cast in the role of a new Moses delivering πλάκες πνευματικαί to the monastic Israel.

The interplay between physical and allegorical dimensions of the mountain finds eloquent expression in the *Life of Climacus* attributed to Daniel of Raithou. There, John of Sinai is described as one who, "while his body remained on Sinai, had already carried his soul to the heavenly mountain (ἐν τῷ οὐρανίῳ ὄρει)". This striking image captures the seamless passage from the physical mountain of Sinai to the celestial mountain of contemplation and union with God.[17]

3 The *Ladder* Between Earth and Heaven: Comparison with the Mountain

The connection between the ladder and the mountain finds expression in several liturgical hymns, mentioning the ladder of Jacob alongside "the shady mountain" or inviting praise of "the holy mountain, the bush, and the ladder that was foreseen".[18] Broader reflections on the assimilation of ladders to heavenly mountains add further depth to this symbolic field.[19]

A particularly fruitful approach lies in the manuscript transmission of the *Ladder*. Among its paratextual elements, the iconography accompanying the *Tabula retrograda* offers the most compelling visual synthesis. With its clear inscriptions of 'earth' at the base and 'heaven' at the summit, the retrograde table presents the ladder as a vertical axis of spiritual movement. In this schema, the ladder corresponds to the physical mountain in several essential ways: both serve as meeting places between God and the ascetic; both demand

16 *PG* 88, 633A:4 *sqq*.

17 σῶμα μὲν τούτου ἐν τῷ Σιναίῳ, ψυχὴν δ' αὖ ἐν τῷ οὐρανίῳ ὄρει εἰσκεκομικώς (Vita Ioh. Sin. *PG* 88, 597A:7-8).

18 ἡ κλίμαξ Ἰακὼβ ἣν ἐθεάσατο, τὸ ὄρος τὸ κατάσκιον; ὄρος ἅγιον βάτον καὶ κλίμακα προοραθεῖσαν πάντες ἀνυμνήσωμεν (ed. Eustratiades, Spyridon 1931, 1, 8:110-111; 1, 31:91-3).

19 See especially Della Dora 2016, 165-70.

a strenuous upward journey; and in both, the summit represents not mere arrival but a transformative encounter leading to *theosis*.

3.1 *Tabula Retrograda*

Byzantine illuminated manuscripts of the *Ladder* frequently include a distinctive visual feature:[20] the *Tabula retrograda*, or inverted index of the thirty steps. This table, accompanied by a diagrammatic or inscribed image of the ladder, usually appears at the end of the book, just before the *Discourse to the Shepherd*. Like the conventional index placed among the prefatory materials, it was most likely prepared by the editors at the monastery of Raithou.[21]

In contrast to the ordinary index, which is read from top to bottom, the *Tabula retrograda* is designed as a visual image positioned above the reader's eye level. The thirty rungs are therefore read from bottom to top, inviting an ascending movement of the gaze. This vertical orientation enacts the spiritual progression of the ascetic, whose attention is continually drawn upward, without interruption or deferral. The iconography surrounding the *Tabula* is rich in symbolism. It portrays the scalary movement as a dangerous yet supported ascent between earth and heaven, both firm and perilously unsteady, as the monks strive toward the summit where Christ awaits them.

The *Tabula retrograda* is sometimes structurally divided into three parts, thereby highlighting the three major stages of the ascetic's progress toward spiritual perfection: "Ascend – the beginning" (ἀναβαίνετε: ἡ ἀρχή), "Ascend – the middle" (ἀναβαίνετε: ἡ μεσότης), and "Ascend – the perfection" (ἀναβαίνετε: ἡ τελειότης). In these manuscripts, the ladder is depicted as three distinct sections, each comprising ten rungs.[22] This tripartite arrangement lends rhythm and dynamism to the depiction of spiritual progress, suggesting an inner unfolding in three phases. Yet it should not be read as a rigid division of the thirty steps according to levels of attainment. The first ten rungs are not reserved exclusively for beginners, the middle ten for those advancing, nor the final ten solely for the perfect.

The vertical dimension of the ladder acquires its full resonance when considered alongside the mountain paradigm. Just as Mount Sinai rises from the desert floor toward the divine presence at its

20 Cf. Martin 1954, figures II-III (at the end of the monograph).

21 On the *Tabula retrograda*, its placement in manuscripts, and the critical edition of its text, see Venetskov 2019, 226-7.

22 Cf. Ath. Batop. 364, 12th century, f. 228r. See also Paris. gr. 863, 11th century, f. 131v (to the left of the *Tabula retrograda*, only two rubrics are preserved: ἡ ἀρχή and ἡ μεσότης; the drawn ladder is intentionally divided into two parts by a blank space between the titles of steps 15 and 16).

summit, the ladder serves as a living bridge spanning the distance between earth and heaven.[23] This symbolic space is rendered with clarity in the illustrations accompanying the *Tabula retrograda*. The interval between earth (ἡ γῆ) and heaven (ὁ οὐρανός) is designated "above the earth" (ὑπὲρ γῆν), a detail often emphasized in the drawings. In the fourteenth-century manuscript Athous, Stavronikita 30 **[fig. 1]**, for example, the phrase "ὑπὲρ γῆν" marks the base of the ladder, while its uppermost section is enclosed in a circular celestial frame bearing a cross and the monogram of Christ (IC XC NI KA), flanked by the sun and moon. A similar scheme appears in the twelfth-century Athens, EBE 310 **[fig. 2]**, where the same inscription is written at the foundation and the blessing hand of Christ surmounts the ladder from the heavenly sphere. In other examples,[24] the base of the ladder bears the dual inscription "earth" (ἡ γῆ) and "what is above the earth" (τὰ ὑπὲρ γῆν), while the icon of Christ crowns the summit.

In certain manuscripts[25] the iconography of the ladder is further enriched with inscriptions that underscore its eschatological and eternal character. At the summit one reads "the beginning and the end" (ἀρχὴ καὶ τέλος), while at the base appears the reverse inscription, "the end and the beginning" (τέλος καὶ ἀρχή), followed by the designations of the earthly and subterranean realms: "the earth and what is beneath the earth" (γῆ καὶ τὰ ὑπὸ γῆν). In these cases, the visual representation of the ladder is often accompanied by poetic texts dedicated to the *Ladder* rather than by the step titles characteristic of the *Tabula retrograda*.

Through these visual and textual elements, the *Tabula retrograda* elevates the ladder into a coherent cosmic figure – a vertical path that mirrors the rigorous and transformative ascent of Mount Sinai itself. In Climacus' vision, the two images converge: the monk's spiritual path is at once a climb up the holy mountain and a step-by-step ascent of the ladder, uniting earth and heaven in a single, perilous movement toward God.

23 For the symbolism of the ladder as "the air whose base is the earth and whose top is heaven", see Philo of Alexandria, *De Somniis* I, 134, ed. Wendland 1898, 234.

24 Cf. Mediol. Ambros. G 20 sup., 14th c., f. 212v.

25 E.g. Sinai. gr. 417, 10th c., f. 13v; Mediol. Ambros. D 58 sup., year 1258/59, f. 2r-v.
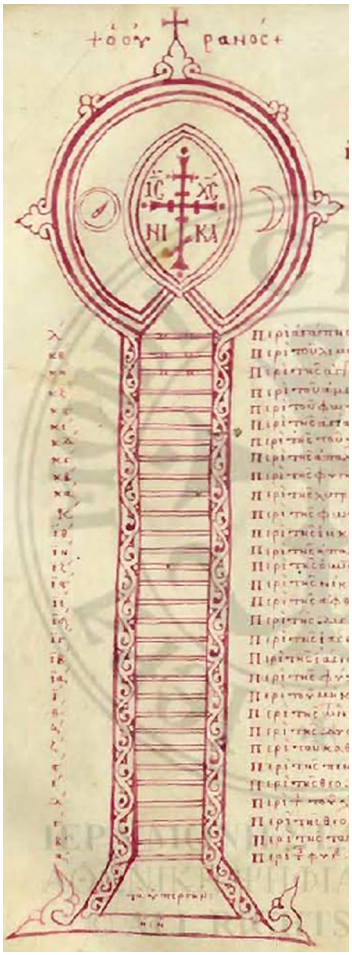


Figure 1 Ath. Stavronik. 30, y. 1324, f. 260v
© Ἅγιον ὄρος, Μονὴ Σταυρονικήτα



Figure 2 Athen. EBE 310, 12th c., f. 202r
© Ἐθνικὴ Βιβλιοθήκη τῆς Ἑλλάδος

For John of Sinai, the monastery itself constitutes "an earthly heaven" (κοινόβιόν ἐστιν ἐπίγειος οὐρανός).[26] This understanding of monastic life as a terrestrial reflection of the celestial realm receives visual form in certain copies of the *Tabula retrograda*. There, the cosmological dimension of the ladder, symbolically spanning the material and the immaterial, is reinforced by an illustration in the

26 Step 4. *PG* 88, 713B:14.

eleventh-twelfth-century codex preserved in Messina **[fig. 3]**, where stars and planets are delicately sketched at the head of the diagram.

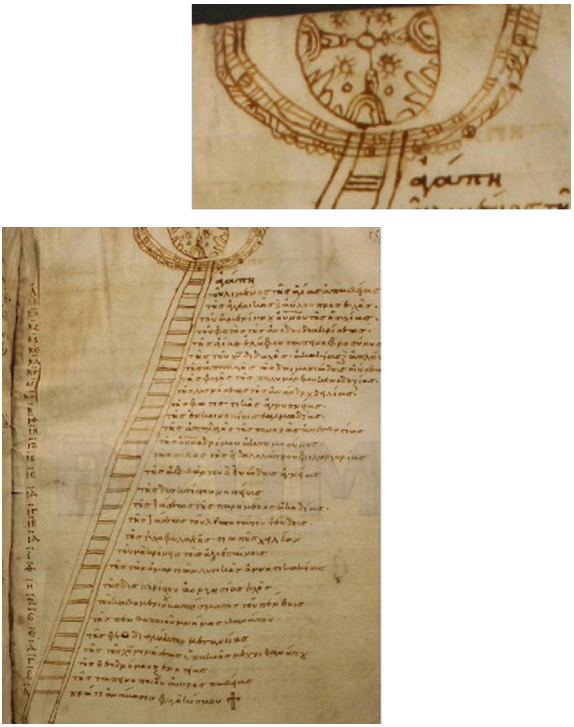


Figure 3 Messan. Salv. 91, 11th-12th c., f. 158r
© Biblioteca Regionale Universitaria "Giacomo Longo" di Messina

By placing the ladder within this cosmic setting, John Climacus and the editors at Raithou invite the reader to see the ascetic journey as more than a personal moral struggle. It becomes a participation in the divine order of creation. Just as Mount Sinai once joined heaven and earth, the ladder becomes the monk's own Sinai: a path rising from the earthly monastery toward the true celestial realm. In this way, the *Tabula retrograda* transforms the spiritual ascent into a vividly cosmological vision. Every step taken by the ascetic echoes the harmony of the universe and anticipates the final union with God. The retrograde table, with its upward reading direction and cosmic framing, reinforces this mountain paradigm. The viewer's gaze is drawn vertically along the rungs, mirroring both the physical effort of climbing Sinai and the inner discipline of the ascetic life. In both the holy mountain and the illustrated ladder, the path is vertical, arduous, and oriented toward the divine. The presence of stars and

planets at the summit, together with Christ's blessing hand, serves as a reminder that the goal of monastic ascent is not merely moral improvement but full participation in the divine order.

The close association between the ladder and the mountain paradigm is vividly illustrated in the manuscript Messina, Biblioteca del Monastero del Santissimo Salvatore, gr. 90 **[fig. 4]**. Here the ladder is depicted not as a mere diagram but as a dynamic path of ascent. Two ropes run along its sides, which the ascetics at the base grasp as they pull themselves upward – a gesture that strikingly evokes the effort of climbers scaling a steep mountain face. Angels on either side hold these ropes, offering support and guidance, while at the summit Christ Himself secures the upper ends, ready to receive those who complete the climb. The composition presents the Lord as both anchor and welcoming presence at the journey's end. Through images such as this, the *Tabula retrograda* renders the ladder as a figure of ascent analogous to Mount Sinai, rather than as a depiction of the mountain's physical topography.



Figure 4 Messan. Salv. 90, 11th-12th c., f. 185v
© Biblioteca Regionale Universitaria "Giacomo Longo" di Messina

3.2 Iconography of Mountains in the *Canon Katanyktikos*

The search for mountain imagery in the manuscript illustrations of the *Ladder* leads to a particularly revealing text: the *Canon katanyktikos*, or Canon of the Penitents. Transmitted, at least, in nine Greek manuscripts from the eleventh-twelfth to the seventeenth century,[27] this work closely reproduces passages from the fifth step of the *Ladder* concerning monks confined in the "Prison" (Φυλακή). Physical representations of mountains appear in the manuscript tradition of the *Ladder* almost exclusively within these paratextual elements linked to the *Canon katanyktikos*. In these miniatures, the mountain is no longer a distant background but becomes an active setting for the ascetic life.

One of the earliest witnesses to the Canon's iconographic tradition is the manuscript București, Biblioteca Academiei Române, gr. 1294 (11th-12th c.).[28] In this manuscript, a troparion of the Canon reads: "Having fallen from a high rank and station, we vain-minded ones have reached the bottom of Hades and the shadow of death; unable to rise from there, let us strike our foreheads against the ground".[29] This passage is illustrated in a densely composed miniature **[fig. 5]**. The penitents are shown prostrate on the bare ground, and heads pressed to the stone. The rugged peaks rise behind and beneath them, evoking both the sacred topography of Sinai and the spiritual landscape of repentance. The mountains in the image carry a rich and ambivalent meaning. In the distance, they evoke the pride from which the penitents have fallen. In the foreground, they signify the necessary descent: to rise again, one must first reach the bottom, exhaust oneself in humility, and strike one's forehead against the earth. The *Canon* thus reveals a sharp ascetic paradox: the summit is not attained by climbing upward alone, but by descending into the abyss.

27 Cf. Athen. EBE 742, 17th c., f. 61r-73v; Athen. EBE 1395, 15th c., f. 1r-16v; Ath. Batop. 376, 11th-12th c., f. 477r-84v; Bucurest. BAR gr. 1294 + Lond. Robert Mc Carthy BM 2042, 11th-12th c., 11 folios; Mediol. Ambros. F 221 inf., No. 5, 17th c., 1-32 (accompanied by a Latin translation); Sinai. gr. 427, 16th c., f. 1r-17r; Vat. gr. 1754, added in the 12th-13th c., f. IVv, 1-19; Venet. Marc. gr. II.32, added in the 15th c., f. 170-71, 202-19; Venet. Marc. gr. II.44, 16th c., f. 180r-95v. For editions of the text, see Delatte 1926, 97-105, Martin 1954, 128-49, and Barnea 1963, 321-4. On the *Canon* and its manuscript witnesses, see also Rigo 2023, 224-9. The recent monograph by Popova (2024), by contrast, cannot be relied upon as a guide to the manuscript tradition of the *Canon of the Penitents*. Its list of Greek witnesses, for instance, includes București BAR gr. 850 on the strength of Camariano (1940, 8, no. 850). That entry, however, describes a nineteenth-century musical booklet ending with a synoptic table headed Γ.Λ. Κανόνιον περὶ τῆς μεταβολῆς τῶν κλιμάκων – a short theoretical table on the ēchoi and klimakes of Byzantine chant, entirely unrelated to the Penitential Canon on Step 5 of the *Ladder*.

28 See Barnea 1963, 319-30 and figures 1-20; see also Barbu 1984, 23-30 (with illustrations).

29 Cf. Bucurest. BAR gr. 1294, f. 7v: ὑψηλῆς ἐκπεσόντες τάξεως καὶ στάσεως οἱ ματαιόφρονες, εἰς πυθμένα ἅδου καὶ θανάτου σκιὰν κατηντήσαμεν, ἀφ' ὧν ἀναστῆναι ἐξατονοῦντες τῷ ἐδάφει τὰ ἡμῶν προσαρράσωμεν μετώπα.



Figure 5 Bucurest. BAR gr. 1294, 11th-12th c., f. 7v

A closely related yet distinct iconographic tradition appears in two other witnesses of the *Canon katanyktikos*, preserved in the Vatican and Venice **[figs 6-7]**. These manuscripts contain similar miniatures accompanied by another troparion from the same Canon: "Seated upon the height of the ground, they cover their faces with their knees and weep".[30]

The miniatures render the Canon's description while introducing a significant visual addition: the penitents are not seated on ordinary ground, but on elevated rocky slopes or isolated peaks (ἐπὶ ψηλοῦ τοῦ ἐδάφους). Their bodies are folded in profound compunction, faces hidden against their knees, with feet dangling over the edge of the precipice. This placement on the heights intensifies their isolation and the inward character of their repentance.

This elevated placement transforms the scene. The monks are suspended between heaven and the abyss, embodying the ascetic tension between divine aspiration and human frailty. The rugged mountain becomes both stage and symbol: a place of radical humility where one must descend to ascend, and a theophanic space

30 Cf. Vat. gr. 1754, 12th-13th c., f. 7v, and Venet. Marc. gr. II.32, 15th c., f. 208r: οὗτοι ἐπὶ ψηλοῦ τοῦ ἐδάφους καθήμενοι, τοῖς γόνασι τὰ πρόσωπα ἐπικαλύπτουσι· καὶ δακρύουσιν. This text closely paraphrases a passage from the fifth step of the *Ladder*: ἄλλους ἐν τῷ ἐδάφει ἐπὶ σάκκου καὶ σποδοῦ καθημένους, καὶ τὸ πρόσωπον τοῖς γόνασι καλύπτοντας, καὶ τὸ μέτωπον εἰς γῆν τύπτοντας (PG 88, 765B:9-11).

where grace and weakness meet. Through these images, the *Canon katanyktikos* situates John Climacus' text by rooting the spiritual "Prison" in the sacred and austere landscape of Sinai itself.



Figure 6 Vat. gr. 1754, 12th-13th c., f. 7v
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Figure 7 Venet. Marc. gr. II.32, 15th c., f. 208r
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4 Mountain Models in the Final Part of the Discourse to the Shepherd

The most eloquent passages concerning the image of the mountain, in all its mystical and allegorical depth, appear at the conclusion of the *Discourse to the Shepherd* (*Ad pastorem*). Here, the author – whether John of Sinai or John of Raithou – unfolds a rich metaphorical encomium of the ideal shepherd, moving successively through the figures of Moses the lawgiver, Joshua son of Nun, and Christ Himself. The text is deliberately ambiguous. It may be addressed to the hegumen in general, or more specifically to John of Raithou, the original recipient of Climacus' work. The most convincing interpretation, however, sees it as a posthumous addition by John of Raithou himself, who turns to address John Climacus as the true guide and head of the Sinaitic monastic community.[31]

The first stage of the mountain ascent is expressed in the final part of the *Discourse*, where the author, addressing the hegumen as spiritual guide, declares: "You have ascended to the height, having passed through every darkness, gloom, and storm".[32] This ascent, the author explains, culminates in an approach to the light after traversing the threefold darkness of ignorance, a light far more venerable and exalted than the burning bush,[33] and is followed by a descent into the deepest valley of humility at Horeb, undertaken after the vision of God.[34] These lines, along with related passages, were later read as a sequence of mountains. A continuous commentary on the *Discourse to the Shepherd* (ἐξήγησις εἰς τὸν λόγον τοῦ ποιμένος), preserved in the fourteenth-century manuscript Chisianus graecus 38 and attributed to Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos,[35] traces this identification step by step, aligning the 'height', Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives, and the 'holy mountain', ultimately assimilated to the summit of the ascetic *Ladder of virtues*. The commentary begins to unfold the mountain's meaning in stages, starting here:

31 For a detailed study of the manuscript tradition of the *Discourse to the Shepherd*, its final section, and questions of attribution, see Venetskov 2020.

32 εἰς ὕψος ἀναβέβηκας, πάντα γνόφον καὶ ζόφον καὶ θύελλαν διακρουσάμενος (PG 88, 1204C:1-2). Cf. Heb 12,18.

33 τῷ φωτὶ πολύ γε τῆς βάτου αἰδεσιμωτέρῳ καὶ ὑψηλωτέρῳ (this reading reflects the majority of manuscripts). Rader's edition (PG 88, 1204C:3-5) inserts καὶ ἀμαυρωτέρῳ between the two adjectives. Manuscript variants for the light described as "far more venerable and exalted than the burning bush" include ἀμαυρωτέρῳ (darker), τρανοτέρῳ (clearer), καθαρωτέρῳ (purer), and λαμπροτέρῳ (brighter).

34 εἰς βαθυτάτην που κοιλάδα ταπεινώσεως ἐν Χωρὴβ ἐκ τῆς θεοπτίας κατελήλυθας (PG 88, 1204C:9-11). For the text of the *Discourse to the Shepherd* and the unique commentary by Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, see Venetskov 2020, 169-82.

35 For a detailed analysis of this commentary, see Venetskov 2020, 134-41.

You too have ascended to the summit of Mount Sinai; I mean the height of knowledge. Having passed through every ignorance of the soul that, being more material, obstructs the reception of divine illumination, you have drawn near to the divine light.[36]

The commentator explicitly identifies the summit with Mount Sinai and the "height" with the divine illumination and knowledge granted to the soul. In this way, the final section of the *Discourse to the Shepherd* presents John Climacus himself as the new Moses of Sinai – one who has traversed the darkness to reach the light, descended into the valley of humility, and now guides his flock from the sacred mountain.

The highest stage of the ascent, "more sovereign and more powerful than all", is expressed in these words, as the heavenly Jerusalem rises above Mount Sinai: "You have ascended to Jerusalem, the vision of the perfect peace of souls; you behold Christ, the God of peace".[37]

The commentary explains that, while narrating and allegorizing the events of Moses' life, the discourse advances to Joshua son of Nun. He too ascended (ἀναβέβηκε) to Jerusalem[38] and allotted the land as an inheritance.[39] Then, with a bold transition (τολμηρῶς ἔρχεται), the narrative moves to Christ, to His Passion, death, and Resurrection. Jerusalem thus becomes the vision of perfect peace, established in the soul of the hegumen who has been liberated from the passions.[40]

The tension rises to its highest pitch as the narrator has the shepherd – whether John of Raithou or John of Sinai – ascend the Mount of Olives,[41] a site rich in evangelical and psalmic memory.[42]

Nikephoros Kallistos explains the passage with precision. Here the hegumen is compared to David and, perhaps even more boldly, to Christ Himself: "following the excellent runner David, or perhaps

36 εἰς τὴν τοῦ ὄρους Σινᾶ καὶ σὺ κορυφὴν ἀναβέβηκας· τὸ ὕψος λέγω τῆς γνώσεως· καὶ παρελθὼν πᾶσαν ἀγνωσίαν ψυχῆς ἐπιπροσθοῦσαν ὡς ὑλικωτέραν τὸν θεῖον δέξασθαι φωτισμόν, ἐπλησίασας τῷ θείῳ φωτί (Vat. Chis. gr. 38, 14th c., f. 244r; edition in Venetskov 2020, 170).

37 εἴπω βούλει τὸ πάντων κυριώτερόν τε καὶ κραταιότερον; ἐπὶ τὴν Ἱερουσαλὴμ ἀναβέβηκας, τὴν ὅρασιν τῆς τελείας εἰρήνης τῶν ψυχῶν· Χριστὸν ὁρᾷς, τὸν Θεὸν τῆς εἰρήνης (PG 88, 1205A:12-15).

38 The movement from Horeb to Jerusalem also recasts the contrast of Gal 4,24-25. The Sinai of the old covenant is not discarded; it is reread as the first height on a path that ends in the Jerusalem of peace in the hegumen's soul.

39 τὰ κατὰ τὸν Μωϋσῆν διεξιὼν καὶ ἀλληγορῶν, ἐπὶ τὸν τοῦ Ναυῆ μεταβέβηκεν Ἰησοῦν· οὗτος γὰρ εἰς Ἱερουσαλὴμ ἀναβέβηκε καὶ ἐκληροδότησε τὴν γῆν (Vat. Chis. gr. 38, 14th c., f. 245r; edition in Venetskov 2020, 175).

40 Cf. Vat. Chis. gr. 38, 14th c., f. 245r; edition in Venetskov 2020, 175.

41 ἐπὶ τὸ ὄρος τῶν Ἐλαιῶν ἔρχῃ (PG 88, 1204B:14-C:1).

42 Cf. Mt 24,3; 26,30; Mc 13,3; 14,26; Lc 21,37; 22,39; Io 8,1; Act 1,12.

Christ as well, you yourself have come to the base of the mountain, that is, to its summit".[43]

The hegumen no longer merely receives commandments; he embodies them. He is David singing victory over the demons; he is Christ who, after the agony in the garden, opens the way to heaven. The mountain's base and its summit are named as one and the same, and for the hegumen who has attained it, the foundation of ascetic life and its highest peak likewise coincide. At this point, the shepherd ceases to be a simple guide: he becomes a living icon of the Logos, the one who leads the flock from daily combat to the Jerusalem of peace.

At the very end of the *Discourse to the Shepherd*, the text reaches its clearest and most exalted summit. The hegumen, perfect ascetic, ascends the holy mountain and reaches heaven in a single, continuous movement. The language moves beyond metaphor, evoking a lived experience patterned on the imitation of Christ:

> You have drawn near to the holy mountain and lifted your eyes toward heaven; you have set your foot upon the base, you have run and run upward, you have been exalted, and you have mounted upon the Cherubim of the virtues.[44]

Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos contextualizes this mysterious 'holy mountain' with illuminating precision. In this reception, the mountain is no longer only Horeb: it is the living book that John Climacus has written to teach the acquisition of the virtues through the most arduous combat against evil and the demons.

For you have trampled upon the enemy, the devil, and you were the first to ascend the difficult Ladder of the virtues (δυσχερῆ τῶν ἀρετῶν Κλίμακα προανέβης), making for us the way and showing us how we must follow you as our guide. Or rather, since you are still in the body, you continue to lead and precede us all, and you have ascended to the summit of the divine Ladder of the virtues (τὸ ἄκρον τῆς θείας τῶν ἀρετῶν Κλίμακος); and the end of this Ladder is divine and perfect love.[45]

43 τῷ καλλιδρόμῳ Δαυὶδ καὶ αὐτὸς παρακολουθῶν, ἢ ἴσως καὶ τῷ Χριστῷ, πρὸς τὴν τοῦ ὄρους βάσιν, ἤτοι τὴν κορυφὴν ἐλήλυθας (Vat. Chis. gr. 38, 14th c., f. 245v; edition in Venetskov 2020, 179).

44 προσεπέλασας τῷ ὄρει τῷ ἁγίῳ καὶ τὸ ὄμμα εἰς οὐρανὸν ἀνέτεινας, καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν βάσιν τὸν πόδα προσεβίβασας, καὶ ἔδραμες καὶ ἀνέδραμες, καὶ ὑψώθης, καὶ ἐπέβης ἐπὶ Χερουβὶμ ἀρετῶν (PG 88, 1208A:2-5). Cf. Ps 17,11.

45 ὅτι τὸν ἐχθρὸν διάβολον κατεπάτησας καὶ τὴν δυσχερῆ τῶν ἀρετῶν Κλίμακα προανέβης, ὁδὸν ποιήσας ἡμῖν καὶ δείξας, πῶς δεῖ σοι ἕπεσθαι ὡς ὁδηγῷ· μᾶλλον δὲ ἐπεὶ ἐν σώματι εἶ, καὶ ἔτι ὁδηγεῖς ἡμᾶς καὶ προβαίνεις πάντων ἡμῶν καὶ ἀνέβης εἰς τὸ ἄκρον τῆς θείας τῶν ἀρετῶν Κλίμακος· τέλος δὲ ταύτης ἡ θεία καὶ τελεία ἀγάπη (Vat. Chis. gr. 38, 14th c., f. 246v; edition in Venetskov 2020, 182).

In conclusion, Mount Sinai emerges in the *Ladder* as a multilayered and profoundly rich symbol of asceticism and spirituality. The mountain is less the dominant metaphor of the thirty discourses than the figure through which Raithou and later scribes located the work: law from Sinai, path from earth to heaven, penitential rock, and finally the book itself.

The mountain is presented as the biblical site of Moses' tablets of the Law; John Climacus is reinterpreted as the new Moses delivering spiritual tablets for monastic guidance. It is also the mountain-ladder that bridges earth and heaven, rendered in the schematic representations of the *Tabula retrograda*. Finally, it unfolds through a series of allegorical heights – from Sinai to Jerusalem, then to the Mount of Olives, and ultimately to the 'holy mountain' as an intelligible space of ascetic practice. In this final transformation, the mountain ceases to be a geographical location and becomes the living guide of the monastic tradition embodied in the *Ladder* of virtues itself.

Through the paratexts added at Raithou, the manuscript imagery of the *Tabula retrograda*, the *Canon* miniatures, and the closing sequence of the *Discourse to the Shepherd*, the physical and biblical mountain of Sinai ceases to be merely the place where the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* was written and becomes the form of the book itself – tablets, ladder, and ascent from Horeb to the holy mountain of the virtues – and thus into the supreme paradigm of the ascetic tradition.

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