

The Souls Journey Into God

by St Bonaventure

(attributed to the Tree of Life by Frater FP)

INTRODUCTION

St Bonaventure was a Franciscan Monk born in central Italy in 1217. He joined the Order in 1243, and wrote a number of masterpieces including a biography of St Francis, and many other treatises. The most widely-known of his works is that dealt with here, "The Soul's Journey into God", a dense *summa* of medieval Christian spirituality. It is based on a vision of the Seraph, the six-winged angelic creature which had provided St Francis his critical mystical experience, and it was whilst meditating on this vision that St Bonaventure realised that "...this vision represented our father's rapture in contemplation and the road by which that rapture is reached."

The actual Latin title of this work is *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, and it is of interest to this present work that *Itinerarium* can be translated as "plan for a journey" (itinerary), which is part of the function served by any initiatory system, for example, the Book of Coming Forth by Day, the Kabbalah, or the Bardo Thodol.

THE JERUSALEM FURNACE

THE STAGES

The Journey of the Soul is divided first into three general stages, being Purgation, Illumination, and Perfection. Each of these responds to first, the human nature, second, the effort of the individual, and third, the action of God as Grace. The actions of the three stages are usually given as ;

Purgation Announcing

Leading

Declaring

Illumination Ordering

Strengthening

Commanding

Perfection Receiving

Revealing

Anointing

These actions may be laid onto the Tree as a very general schemata of the processes undergone by the Initiate, and follow a similar development of pattern to that found in Alchemy.

Bonaventure divides the Journey into six stages, taking the Seraph as the symbolic matrix of the description, and these stages take us from the condition of the mortal man to that of the

Contemplative residing in the mystical experience of the "Superluminous Darkness" of God. I have ascribed these stages to the Kabbalah and the Initiatory System from Malkuth to the Abyss, as Bonaventure, like many mystics of the time, ceases his description at this level, although hinting at further states beyond. As Brady notes in his preface, the Journey takes us "... into the cloud of unknowing, which is itself perhaps the most perfect knowing here below of the One in Three." I take this "One in Three" to refer to the Upper Sephiroth of the Tree above the Abyss. It is the contention of the Initiate that States can be opened above this Abyss, where identity merges with God as no-thing, and the Self is entirely annihilated. This assertion may have been unspeakable for such as Bonaventure due to its potential for interpretation as heresy (see Katz, "The Life of Bernadette Roberts", in ICOM archives for further of this theme).

The condition of the mortal man is pictured as that of a "poor man in the desert". However, this situation is deemed redeemable, as the Franciscans followed the doctrine of exemplarism; that all creation is a set of moments in the inner dynamism of God. That is to say, by observing the events of nature, one could come to know the dealings and nature of God. As Bonaventure words it; "This is our whole metaphysics; emanation, exemplarity, consummation; to be illumined by spiritual rays and to be led back to the highest reality". The journey is also related to the description of Solomon's Temple and I have accordingly divided the following synopsis.

THE COURT BEFORE THE TABERNACLE

ZELATOR (Malkuth)

The first stage is that of imposing technique to exercise the natural powers which sow the seeds of initiatory progress, and avoid "sin" (i.e. automatic attachment to the apparent). These natural powers are grace, which is awoken by prayer; justice, which is awoken by leading a good life; knowledge, which is activated by meditation; and wisdom, which is brought into being through contemplation. The quickening of these latent faculties by the practices given brings the Initiate to the "Valley of Tears" and the commencement of the second stage. The Valley of Tears can be seen as symbolic of the 32nd path of the Tree leading from Malkuth to Yesod, and is also indicated on the Moon Atu of the Tarot.

THE SANCTUARY OR FORWARD AREA OF THE TABERNACLE

THEORICUS (Yesod)

The second stage of contemplation is the observation of the "vestiges" of God, which is performed through the "mirror of things perceived through sensation". The Latin root for "vestige" primarily means "footprint", and it can be seen in a similar way to the chief Mayan God, who was only known by his "footprint", that is, by his passing, rather than his presence. Bonaventure observes, according to his reading of Aristotle's physics, and Augustine's, that the world is "generated", and that "everything that moves, is moved by something else". During the main work of the Theoricus, which is observation, one may come to recognise a unity running behind the apparent world.

The third stage of the journey is the successful conclusion of the work of the Theoricus, whom has come to see that one "will be able to see God through yourself as through an image, which is to see *through a mirror in an obscure manner.*"

PRACTICUS (Hod)

The third stage continues with the study of natural, rational and moral philosophy, which illuminates the mind, and thus, "illumined and flooded by such brilliance, unless it is blind, can be

led through itself to contemplate that Eternal Light", which is a key experience of the Initiatory journey. That is to say, the reason, as it becomes refined and tested, eventually concedes its own place and limitations, and loses the power to confuse or enslave the identity. It is, like each of our false separations, "led through itself".

PHILOSOPHUS (Netzach)

Citing the Cantic of Canticles as a key text for stage four reveals much of Bonaventure's belief about the work and events characterising the stage. Indeed, the emotional world is much in evidence in his descriptions of "the fullness of devotion, by which the soul becomes like a column of smoke from aromatic spices of myrrh and frankincense", "intense admiration, by which the soul becomes like the dawn, the moon and the sun", and "the superabundance of exultation, by which the soul, overflowing with delights of the sweetest pleasure, leans wholly upon her beloved". It is to this stage that Crowley recommended the work of Liber Astarte, which was a devotional rite seeking to unite the Philosophus with a particular deity through devotion.

The practical aspect of this stage is in the "hierarchical operations" of perfecting or arranging our soul as in the "heavenly Jerusalem". That is to say, we must configure ourselves in accordance with our own personal revelations, as attained previously.

THE HOLY OF HOLIES

ADEPTUS MINOR (Tiphareth)

The fifth stage is the attempt to gain the *apex mentis seu synderesis scintilla*, the highest part of the soul, from which mystical union proceeds. Whereas the prior stages have been concerned with enquiry and resultant revelations, the middle stages are concerned with "being" and "direct knowing" of the "eternal and most present; utterly simple and the greatest; most actual and unchangeable". Here words begin to lose relevance to actual direct experience of that which is "greatest precisely because it is utterly simple".

In Kabbalah this is denoted partly by the symbolism of the Veil of Paroketh which separates the lower four Sephiroth from Tiphareth.

THE MERCY SEAT AND SOLOMON'S THRONE

ADEPTUS MAJOR (Geburah) and ADEPTUS EXEMPTUS (Chesed)

The sixth and seventh stages of the Work are described with analogy to the two Cherubs facing the Mercy Seat. The discernment of Geburah and the joy of Chesed are pointed to as connected to the contemplation of the trinity (i.e. the Upper Sephiroth of Binah, Chockmah and Kether). A "perfection of illumination" is attained at the end of the sixth stage, and the seventh stage is given to the "passing over of the Red Sea" into the "Superluminous darkness" and "unknowing", which I would suggest describes the stages of the Abyss and Binah in the Initiatory System. From that point, Bonaventure hints "to the friend to whom these words were written, let us say with Dionysius;

But you, my friend,
concerning mystical visions,
with your journey more firmly determined,
leave behind

your senses and intellectual activities,
sensible and invisible things,
all nonbeing and being;
and in this state of unknowing
be restored,
insofar as it is possible,
to unity with Him
who is above all essence and knowledge.
For transcending yourself and all things,
by the immeasurable and absolute ecstasy of a pure mind,
leaving behind all things
and freed from all things,
you will ascend
to the superessential ray
of the divine darkness."

AFTER THE PASSING OVER

MAGISTER TEMPLI (Binah), MAGUS (Chockmah) and IPSSISIMUS (Kether)

As a conclusion, Bonaventure notes that during the final stages of contemplation and work, it is acceptance of death or unity with the "fire" which alone can achieve a successful conclusion, in order that we may "pass out of this world to the Father". If the work of the lower Sephiroth is characterised by inquiry, and that of the middle Sephiroth by being, then the work of the upper Sephiroth is that of transcendence.

Bonaventure's prose is extremely straightforward, despite a tendency to repeat a theme by listing aspects of it from many angles, and as such is quite accessible to the student of Mystical attainment.

This fire is God,
and his furnace is in Jerusalem.

For more information, visit the Templum Kabbalah at www.templum.demon.co.uk/kabbalah.html or the Flamel College Library at www.FlamelCollege.org/library.htm

The Soul's journey into God, 2. Ibid., prologue, 4, pp. 55-56. \II, 5, pp. 113-115. The theologian and mystic enters into its composition, to put in bold relief the mysteries of the Cross in the life of Francis, whom Bonaventure in the *Legem* a minor calls the *insignis sectator crucifixi Iesu*, the outstanding. 3. On the meaning of *legenda* or legend in the Middle Ages, cf. pp. 37-38. XIV. The Soul's Journey Into God, by St Bonaventure, attributed to the Tree of Life by Frater FP INTRODUCTION St Bonaventure was a Franciscan Monk born in central Italy in 1217. He joined the Order in 1243, and wrote a number of masterpieces including a biography of St Francis, and many other treatises. The most widely-known of his works is that dealt with here, "The Soul's Journey into God", a dense *summa* of medieval Christian spirituality. It is based on a vision of the Seraph, the six-winged angelic creature which had provided St Francis his critical mystical experience, and it was written after *The Soul's Journey*. The Tree of Life presupposes the theological vision of the former treatise, but evokes a more simple and direct devotional response to the humanity of Christ that became characteristic of Franciscan religious sensibility as it developed in the later Middle Ages. The third work, *The Life of St. Francis (Legenda maior)*, was commissioned by the General Chapter of the Friars Minor held at Narbonne in 1260.