

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF JESUS

• Klaus Berger •

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1. Exegetical remarks

The event of the Transfiguration forms the center of Mark’s gospel. It is a visionary confirmation of Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah in the preceding chapter (Mk 8), and in descending from the mountain after the Transfiguration, Jesus is setting out on his path toward the Passion. The Transfiguration is thus the climax and turning point of what was recounted so far of the life of Jesus. In addition, apart from Jesus’s baptism, it is the only place where the heavenly Father himself speaks with a voice from heaven, and it is only here that the Old Testament prophets—Jesus’s “colleagues”—appear.

In terms of its genre, the text presents a union of vision and locution—a union familiar since the prophetic revelations of the Old Testament. In Judaism and in the New Testament, a particular schema developed with the following structure: an image or a visual revelation; a phase in which the incomprehension of the human recipient is depicted; and finally an explanation of the image through an additional revelation in words. It is interesting that widely varying literary forms can stand in for the image; for example, a citation of scripture from the Old Testament, the parables of Jesus, visions,

words of Jesus that were not understood until this point, stages on a journey to heaven or hell. Each individual aspect is then elucidated as far as possible through the verbal revelation. The revealer who explains in detail is thus referred to as the “*angelus interpretis*” (the angel of interpretation) in the literature dealing with visions and journeys to heaven.

The theological significance of this doubling of vision and locution is that the one to whom the revelation is given cannot interpret it solely on its own terms. A second revelation is needed, which guarantees and authenticates the “interpretation” for him. If this is also the case at the Transfiguration, then the verbal explanation of the whole is clearly in need of authentication, which comes through the fact that God himself speaks with his own voice. In a particular way, this permits us to see the theological and material unity of the revelation of Old and New Testament clearly portrayed. It is one and the same God who is speaking here. The God of the prophets is the Father of Jesus Christ. This is already indicated through the arrangement of the two halves of the gospel text.

2. Historical context

As a starting point for approaching the Transfiguration, I take it for granted that it was an experience of Jesus and his disciples during the life of Jesus. I interpret the Transfiguration as a mystical experience, the meaning of which is primarily to distinguish the Son, as the new bearer of revelation, from the prophets of the Old Covenant. This differentiation between the prophets (plural) and the Son (singular) also applies to Mark 12:1-10 (the parable of the wicked tenants) and Galatians 4 (slaves versus the child). Hebrews 3:1-5 is similarly framed (son/slave). One can say therefore that the difference drawn between being a child and being a slave, or between the Son and the prophets, is one of the earliest instruments for distinguishing the new from the old revelation. The point of this distinction is not polemic, but simply a recommendation of the new revelation.

The truth of this interpretation of the Transfiguration is shown with particular clarity in Peter’s speech regarding the three dwellings. There is a tendency in German homiletic literature, and in the commonly accepted approach to the text, to see the desire to build three huts as an expression of Peter’s sense of well-being; and

this in sharp contrast to the Passion that is now beginning. But this cannot be the case: the voice from heaven must be understood rather as a sharp correction of precisely this statement from Peter. The point of Peter's "uncomprehending" answer is revealed clearly in the complete equality with which he treats Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. If each one of them receives a dwelling, then these three authorities will live and speak, teach and die, next door to one another in three similar houses of instruction. For the "tent" or "hut" or "house" or "dwelling" is not intended for their private lives, but rather as the place for receiving revelation and for an enduring and repeated encounter with God, as was the tent of Moses during the Exodus from Egypt. It is only from this perspective that the statements make sense.

The meaning of the heavenly voice's correction, then, is this: only the Son, only Jesus Christ is appointed mediator between God and man. Only he speaks legitimately about God. And when the voice from heaven says "listen to him," then this also means that Jesus is the one who legitimately interprets the entire revelation of scripture, of the Old Testament.

The form of the sentence, "This is . . ." indicates a proclamation, the introduction of Jesus to the circle of disciples. He is presented to them. Sonship is not a private relationship, as it could seem to appear in Mark 1:11 (the voice from heaven speaks only to Jesus); rather, this greatest possible nearness of a man to God means a great increase in truth for the rest of mankind.

Mark is concerned with this history because the divine Sonship of Jesus—which is declared here directly by God for the second time (the law of two witnesses)—stands in clear contrast to the approaching Passion and death of Jesus. For the Son of God is the same one who will be raised from the dead (Rom 1:3f.) The Transfiguration signifies that death will be rendered powerless in the end.

3. Typology

The text of the Transfiguration stands in a particular tension with Mark's account of the Last Supper. With this claim the typological aspect of the Transfiguration pericope comes into view, an aspect which grew out of early Christian scriptural exegesis. As we will see, the Transfiguration contains numerous elements from

the Old Testament concerning God's revelation and the ratification of the covenant at Sinai.

We can look at it this way: Jesus's ascent of the mountain of Transfiguration is modeled on the revelation at Sinai, and the institution of the covenant at the Last Supper clearly corresponds to the institution of the covenant in Exodus 24. However, the two belong together, since both the reception of the commandments, or the privileging of Moses's teaching authority, and the ratification of the covenant are decisive elements of the Sinai narrative

The details of the typology can be sketched as follows:

Mark 9:2: a select group of the disciples

Exodus 24:1, 14: not all of the elders

Mark 9:2: Jesus and the disciples climb the mountain of the Transfiguration

Exodus 24:1, 9: Moses and his companions climb Mount Sinai

Mark: the mountain is the place where the revelation is received

Exodus: God reveals himself at Sinai

Mark 9:4: Moses appears

Exodus 24:2: Moses is the witness of the revelation

Mark 9:2f.: Jesus's face is transfigured (and also his garments)

Exodus 34:29, 34: Moses's face is transfigured after receiving the revelation

Mark 9:7: the voice of God provides the decisive revelation

Exodus 24:34: God's voice authoritatively resounds on Sinai

Mark 9:8: Jesus's transfiguration ceases

Exodus 34:30-35 Moses's transfiguration ceases

Mark 9:5: Peter speaks of the tents of revelation

Exodus 33f.: The tent of revelation is an enduring institution

Mark 14:24: As a sign of the covenant, Jesus institutes a sign out of red liquid that is poured out (wine) with the words, "This is my blood of the covenant," which he gives to the Twelve to drink.

Exodus 24:8: Moses institutes a sign from red liquid poured out (blood), and, sprinkling the blood on the people who are gathered, says: "Behold the blood of the covenant."

We can draw from this schema the following theological conclusion: Jesus's words are the "new giving of the law" and his death on the Cross (blood) is the new ratification of the covenant. The Old Covenant and its authorities are not forgotten, but they are surpassed. The blood of rams and cows is replaced with the blood of the death of Jesus. The more lasting duration corresponds to the higher value. Despite his bitter death, Jesus will live forever. This conceptual structure of something being surpassed by what is higher is particularly codified—in reference to Jesus—in the Letter to the Hebrews, which frequently picks up on the contrast between the earthly and the heavenly, between what is passing away and what endures, and between a peaceful and smooth existence on earth and the blessedness of heaven. The things of earth, the things that pass away, however, are never thereby stripped of their value; it is not a question here of dualism, but rather of these things' elevation and perfection.

At first glance, there would appear to be numerous correspondences to draw from the history of religions. However, ultimately the typology of Moses remains the only relevant analogy, and following our analysis we may say that this typology was the express intention of the evangelist. The revelation on the mountain and the covenant are two central events in the history of Israel, which find their correspondence in Jesus. The "intolerant" focus on Jesus alone says something about the bold claim of Christianity regarding the "Son of God."

4. Christology

Christology ("Son of God") has particular consequences in Mark 9 that are, at the very least, suggestive: Jesus's divine Sonship means that even before Easter his body bears a distinctive quality, which is manifest in distinctive events, both at this point and elsewhere. Our earlier observations preclude the alternative explanation which would read the passage as a post-Easter text. The only remaining possibility is that, in accord with the opinion and experiences of his companions, Jesus's body here is an expression of the status of his existence vis-à-vis God. Something similar occurs when Jesus walks on the water, where we would say that the force of gravity was suspended. It is at least conceivable that Jesus might also have radiated light. And we could certainly also ask whether, in

many of the miracles that Jesus worked with his body, it was from his body that the power actually went forth.

The illumination of Jesus's body at the Transfiguration has parallels in accounts of angels who are also described as having "gleaming garments." And there is no doubt that the garments represent the body. According to Jewish legend, the swaddling clothes of the infant Elijah gleamed at his birth, and Noah's gleaming body at birth gave rise to the suspicion that he had been begotten by an angel. What this reveals is that garments are an expression of genealogy, and the source of this illumination is understood to be, exclusively, heaven. In regard to the Elijah and Noah parallels, we can ask whether reports of Jesus's childhood (as given in Luke and Matthew) in fact serve as a backdrop to Mark's gospel. For bodily divine Sonship can be communicated only genetically.

Here one could raise the objection that there is a long line of individuals (Stephan, for example) in both early Judaism and early Christianity, about whom we have "transfiguration" accounts, without these being genetically grounded. This holds true for Abraham, Daniel, Jeremiah, the Jewish high-priest Hananiah, and Pinchas. Yet all of these transfigurations have to do with the individual's face, or more precisely his eyes. Where the entire body is spoken of, there is no presumption of "transfiguration." This is also true for Stephan; only his face is transfigured (Acts 6:15).

The first point is the astonishing range of the tradition. The fact that Moses is expressly mentioned in the text suggests that the scene is to some extent a reworking of the transfiguration of Moses on Mount Sinai. But why should Moses have so much competition? It is not just everyone who gets transfigured, just a select body of names that—except for Hananiah—everyone still remembers today. Can we say that Moses functions as the prototype of the particularly graced missionary? The tradition regarding Moses's transfigured countenance takes on a certain independence here.

Philo of Alexandria says of Abraham: "Whenever, therefore, he was possessed by the Holy Spirit he at once changed everything for the better: his eyes and his complexion, and his size and his appearance while standing, and his motions, and his voice" (*On the Virtues*, 217). Regarding Moses, he says: "inspired from above . . . he was improved in his body, through his soul" (*The Life of Moses II*, 69). Hippolytus says of Daniel (comparison with Moses): "Daniel took on the form of an angel; his face became fiery. He appeared at times as a man, at times as an angel" (*In Daniel* 3,7). The Coptic

Jeremiah Apocryphon (ed. Kuhn) says of Jeremiah: “the prophet Jeremiah shone like the sun;” in the Syriac *Acta Philippi* (ed. Wright), we read: “and they saw that his face was like the angel of the Lord”; and *Leviticus rabba* 1,1: “When the Holy Spirit rested on Pinchas, his face glowed like a torch.”

We find parallels for the Transfiguration narrative as a whole within this milieu, as well. In the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* (ed. Steindorff) it said of Zephaniah: “Then he ran to all the righteous ones, namely, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Enoch and Elijah and David. He spoke with them as friend to friend, speaking one with another.”

We determine, then, that Jesus is characterized explicitly after the model of the prophets who “like Moses were transfigured.” It is the voice from heaven, then, that provides the element of surpassing what has gone before. It is only in Jesus’s case that not only the face, but expressly the entire body (along with the garments) is similar to the face of Moses.

It is at this point that the theological question of the New Testament, the question of Jesus’s relation to God, emerges in light of the experience of the Transfiguration.

5. *Jesus’s relation to God in light of the Transfiguration*

The expression “Son of God” is found only at the Transfiguration—as distinct from the transfiguration accounts from early Judaism and the early Church noted above. Questions then arise, especially when we take the Transfiguration and the voice together: Does Jesus participate in God? Can one say that God appears in him? Or does something appear in him that, in this plenitude, is proper only to God? Does what appears in him make him the sole Son of the Father? Can we consider the multiform presence of God, or rather of the divine Spirit, in the fathers and prophets mentioned above as a kind of inspiration? And since there is no opposition in Judaism between matter and spirit, then every presence of the divine Spirit must have physical consequences. It is also obvious that there are degrees of presence, and that the Son as Son makes the Father present to the highest possible degree.

Stated positively: that which God can communicate is not an abstract formula (“essence”) but is rather his changeable and extra-sensory light. God had communicated himself to the prophets and

fathers to such a degree that their faces were illumined. He communicates himself entirely to Jesus; this is why his garments are illumined. He is indeed the Son and not a slave as the others are. This is why the difference in rank and in the density of the revelation can be grasped aesthetically, though it is a mystical aesthetic and not a visual one that could, for example, be photographed.

The most concise way to recapitulate this is in the phrase, “God the Father appears in the Son,” even if what appears in the Son is not the Father but entirely God and God entirely. The formula of the early Church, “Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine,” too, is a superb summary of what is meant here.

In order to make this meaning plausible, it is helpful to refer to the ancient Church’s teaching regarding the anti-Christ. The devil is said to appear “in the anti-Christ.” What is frequently the case is true here too: the anti-Christology retains older stages of Christology.

A final note goes back to a famous passage from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament: According to Baruch 3:38, “God appeared upon earth and wandered among men.” The *Testaments of the Patriarchs* append “as a man” and thereby make visible their own theology of the Incarnation. This also holds true if the text is Jewish-Christian in origin, as, for example, *Testamentum Aser*, 7, 2 f. (ed. de Jonge): “God will save Israel and all the peoples in the form of a man”; *Testamentum Benjamin* 10:7: “You will worship the King of Heaven, who appeared on earth in the form of a man of humility.” The important point here is the expression “appear . . . in the form of.”

The Christology of the Transfiguration event is a theology of epiphany, which helped promote the earliest identifications of Jesus as distinct from the prophets. God communicates himself in different degrees as a light that transforms. The fact that the distinction from other recipients of this light remains one of degree points to the plausibility of this Christology, among other things.

Mark 9:2–9 is, then, an implicitly trinitarian text, because any transformation of men, according to the parallels, always occurs through the Holy Spirit.—*Translated by Nicholas J. Healy III.* □

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