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SYNOPTIC TRANSFIGURATIONS: MARK 9, 2-10 AND PARTNERS

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Patristic study reveals a great variety of interpretation of the transfiguration. The literature has been thoroughly analysed by J. A. McGuckin, who has published the outline of his findings in a short article ("The patristic exegesis of the transfiguration": *Studia patristica XVIII/1* [Kalamazoo 1985] 335-341). Of course we find various moralizings such as preachers produce in every age: The three disciples were rewarded with the vision of Christ's glory because they sustained a long fast like Moses and Elijah, according to Tertullian (*De jejunio 6*). Many fathers from Origen to Palamas see the climbing of the mountain as a symbol for the ascent of the soul in the practice of contemplation towards the vision of God. None of those McGuckin mentions includes that banal nonsense which I hear in almost every modern sermon on the subject, to the effect that the coming down to the plain below is more important than what happened on the mountain; a doctrine which says more about the practical atheism of modern British religion than about the Gospel of Christ or the texts of the New Testament.

The predominant patristic themes are three. For the first, let McGuckin speak: "The main concern of the fathers is unquestionably with the consideration of Thabor as a theophany: in which the godhead revealed is not so much that of the Father who speaks from the cloud, but that of the Son who is transfigured in light" (p. 336). The other two themes are resurrection, whereby the glorification of the Son anticipates the risen glory of the saints (not so much of the Lord himself); and Moses and Elijah as symbolizing the old covenant, witnessing to Christ both by their presence and by their departure (McGuckin 338-339). This present study shows that the fathers were in principle right in their exegesis about the first and third of these. I am of course not wishing to vindicate every detail of patristic exposition. Much of what the fathers write is dependent upon an established doctrinal synthesis of biblical material and dogmatic development of which Matthew, Mark and Luke were innocent. These developments had the effect, from which we are free, of suppressing the differences and thus destroying the literary and theological distinctiveness of the Synoptic writers.

First however a comment on 2 Peter 1,16-21 is desirable. Here in what I regard as proto-patristic exegesis two themes emerge. First, Peter's doctrinal bequest is not, says the writer. a human invention, but direct divine testimony which Peter received as an eyewitness, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am pleased," heard as the Father gives Christ honour and glory on "the holy mountain". This perhaps develops Matthew, where the words of God coincide most nearly (Mt. 17,5). One would expect the "holy mountain" to be Zion, where the temple stands, as in the Psalms (such as 42/43,3) and with strong eschatological overtones in Isaiah 65 (verses 9LXX.11.25). Perhaps a spiritual Zion lies behind this, where "the assembly of the firstborn" meets with "God the judge of all, and the spirits of the perfected righteous, and Jesus the mediator of a new covenant" (Heb. 12,22-24).

Secondly the Petrine author puts forward as his second vindication of the doctrinal bequest the prophetic scripture. Spiritually interpreted as it was spiritually written, it will serve as a beacon of illumination (2,19-21). He does not connect this with his reminiscences of the transfiguration, but the coincidence with the patristic perception of Moses and Elijah may not be accidental.

Now we turn to the Gospels, and first to Luke 9,28-36. His redaction has the clearest character, and may be the latest of the Synoptics. His variations from Mark and perhaps Matthew reveal his purposes.

Where the others say "after six days", Luke has, "It happened about eight days after these sayings (or, events)". In all three versions the reference is to the question of Jesus and Peter's confession and the teaching about the suffering of the Son of Man and his followers. Some fathers rationalized the apparent contradiction of six days and eight, but in many cases (beginning with Clement of Alexandria) speculated on the numerology of the Eight, the ogdoad. Luke either takes the six days to mean "about a week", or else deliberately relates what follows to the eschatological Lord's Day at the end of the world, which was commonly the "eighth day". If so, Peter's confession is symbolically on the first day, like the creation and (in one sense) Christ's resurrection. I doubt if Luke thought along these lines, or expected his readers to do so; he prefers demystification. It is perhaps worth noting that he adds a day's journey at the end of the story in 9,37 for coming down from the hill-country, a day not in Matthew or Mark, and he may do the same at the beginning.

The "mountain" of Luke's account is in fact a case of demystification. Mark has a "high" mountain, which Matthew follows; some scribes make it "very high" in manuscripts of Matthew, and 2 Peter makes it "holy". For Luke however it is the ordinary hill-country where Jesus habitually makes his prayers. Before appointing the 12 he "went out into the mountain to pray" (*exelthein auton eis to oros proseuxasthai* 6,12). Persistent prayer in the face of hardship and before important events is a Lucan characteristic, so Jesus prays at his baptism (3,21), before appointing disciples (6,12), before questioning Peter (9,18), before teaching about prayer (11,1). He thus sets an example of what he teaches (18,1) and the saints observe (1,10; 2,37; Acts 1,4 etc.). So the mountain is not exceptional, and the prayer is what all the faithful owe to God.

More demystification follows. Where Mark has, "and he was transfigured before them" (9,2), Luke elucidates, "the appearance of his face became different". Jesus' clothes, which he mentions next, presumably covered his whole body except the face, hands and feet. So if there is a visible transformation apart from the clothes, it must affect the face. It is fair to assume that those resurrection narratives, including one in Luke, which postulate Jesus unrecognized by his friends, presuppose a similar transformation (Mt. 28:17; Lk. 24,30-31; Jn. 20,15). Luke does not say *how* the appearance changed, but only that the face looked different. Matthew also introduces reference to the face, which may conceivably have affected Luke: "and his face shone like the sun" (Mt. 17,2). But unlike Luke, who has merely intrepreted Mark's "he was transfigured before

them", Matthew makes Jesus' face a model of resurrection light, or more: when the tares are burnt and the wheat gathered into barns, "then shall the righteous shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom" (Mt. 13,43).

Luke makes something more elegant of Mark's longwinded description of the clothes: "his clothing became sparkling white" (9,29). There is demystification here, where Mark has emphasized the unnatural: "his clothes became shining very white, such that no laundryman on earth can so whiten" (Mk. 9,3). Such apophatic laundering does not appeal to the practical Luke. He uses terms which recur in other contexts. The two men who confronted the women at the tomb in Lk. 24,4 did so "in sparkling apparel" (*en esthēti astraptousē*), and the two men who stood by the apostles when Jesus ascended did so "in white robes" (Acts 1,10). So Jesus' robes fit a Lucan pattern for glorious persons.

But so, remarkably, do Moses and Elijah. In Mark and Matthew these men simply appear to the disciples, and were seen conversing with Jesus. Luke says, "And behold, two men (*andres dyo*) were talking with Jesus, and they were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and were discussing his exodus, which he was going to complete in Jerusalem" (Luke 9,30-31). The appearance "in glory" strongly suggests that they were white-robed or sparkling-robed, and the superfluous expression "two men" assimilates it to the couples in Acts 1,10 and especially Lk. 24,4, where two men replace the one white-robed youth of Mk. 16,5 and the one brilliant white-robed angel of Mt. 28,2-3. Luke seems to suggest that it is Moses and Elijah who attest Christ's resurrection (and also the crucifixion) in 24,5-7 and his future return on the glory-cloud in Acts 1,11. It is no surprise that the subject of the conversation, with which Luke characteristically expects to satisfy the curiosity of his readers, is "the exodus which he was to complete at Jerusalem". Here those patristic interpreters are surely on the right lines, who see Moses and Elijah as symbols of Law and Prophets, whose testimony to the suffering and rising Messiah is so frequent a theme in Luke (as for instance 24,27). Their testimony lies behind the words of the other pairs of brightly clad witnesses, even if they are not to be taken as identical with Moses and Elijah. Here in 9,31 they speak of Jesus' coming "exodus". This may import some of the triumph of the Paschal victory, but its primary meaning is simply his death, his "departure". The first prophetic testimony is to the death. Theological interpreters of the transfiguration do well to remember that the subject of it is primarily the Crucified, which for all his demystification Luke knows as well as any other. We could know this, even without the elucidation in Luke, from the context in the gospels, surrounded as the transfiguration is by accounts of the suffering Son of Man.

In 9,33 Luke presents exactly, but with stylistic improvements, the words of Peter and Mark's explanation (Mk. 9,5): "Peter said to Jesus, 'It is good for us to be here, and let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah,' not knowing what he was saying". But he seems to consider it insufficient. First he makes it clear that the vision was a concrete historical one, not a vague dream or subjective vision. Just as he makes the Holy Spirit descend at Christ's baptism "in bodily form" as a pigeon (Lk. 3,22), so here Luke makes it clear that Peter and his colleagues were wide awake. The tenses of the verbs rule out any suggestion that they were drowsy, and kept awake with a struggle, as we do at afternoon lectures. *ēsan bebarēmenoi hypnō* is pluperfect: "they had been fast asleep"; *diagrēgorēsantes de* is aorist: "but having woken up". Luke then becomes repetitious, which (for one who suppressed Mark's laundryman) must be emphatic: "they saw his glory and the two men who stood beside him". Luke may have contributed here to the "eyewitness of his majesty" of 2 Peter 1,16. He is surely making the same point which that author spells out: "It was not in pursuit of fancy stories that we informed you of the power and presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, but having become eyewitnesses of his majesty". It is perhaps for the same reason that Luke suppresses Mark's "suddenly they looked around" (Mk. 9,8), and is content with, "as the voice came, Jesus was found alone" (Lk. 9,46). Mark's words might imply waking from a dream or trance.

The second elucidation in Luke is to explain Peter's remark about tents, which is obscure in Mark. Luke may have done permanent damage at this point, since most modern exegetes I have consulted give the same explanation: Peter wanted to keep Moses and Elijah with them. So we read, "and it came about that as they (Moses and Elijah) were being separated from him (Jesus), Peter said to Jesus, . . ." (9,33a). At this point it is still a practical, Martha-like suggestion, made in a state of full consciousness. It brings about the genuinely supernatural rebuke: "As he said this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were frightened as they entered the cloud" (9,34). Luke shifts the terror from Mark's place, where it explains Peter's error, to terror at the coming of the cloud. Clouds on mountains are terrifying, but this turns out to be the kind of cloud that enwrapped Moses' mountain-top of old (Ex. 24,15-18). God speaks from it. McGuckin found four patristic sources which took the departure of Moses and Elijah, leaving Jesus alone, to signify the abolition of the old law in the presence of the new (p. 339 at notes 36,37). Such a thought may be present in Luke himself, where Marcion found it. Luke changes one word in the divine saying, "chosen" (*eklelegmenos*) replacing "beloved/unique" (*agapētos*). Luke allowed *agapētos* to stand at the baptism (3,22), but not here. Perhaps what was fitting there, where Jesus learns that he is God's beloved, pleasing to him, fails in clarity here. Jesus must be unique, chosen out above all the prophets and sons of God. In this respect Luke is in tune with the interpretation I shall put on Mark.

For the rest we may ignore Luke. He softens Jesus' command to silence (9,36b/Mk. 9,9), suppresses some obscure material about Elijah (Mk. 9,9-13), which Matthew found it necessary to rewrite (17,9-13), and after allowing a decent interval of a day for the journey, follows Mark into the next episode (9,37/Mk. 9,14).

Turning to Mark, who is our chief concern, we should avoid "reading in" Matthew's or Luke's interpretations. First, some minor points may be noted. "After six days" (9,2) may indicate a sabbath. That would fit the presence of the three disciples "by themselves alone", a phrase reminiscent of the frustrated attempt at a retreat "by themselves to a desert place" in 6,31-32. The command to silence at 9,9 also reflects a Marcan idiom of secrecy still prevailing at 9.30.

In what follows I shall set aside consideration of the pre-Marcan tradition, because it is impalpable. Without doubt the formula "Elijah with Moses" in 9,4 and the enigmatic argument about Elijah in 9,9-13 suggest that an earlier version of the story had a meeting only with Elijah. Moses is indispensable to the story as Mark tells it, if only because of the three tents in 9,5. His presence rules out particular weight being given to the fact that Elijah did not die but was translated bodily to heaven.

We start with the central feature of the incident, which is the transfigured Jesus in conversation with Elijah and Moses. What have these two in common? Clearly they are both representative figures of the Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets. They provide models for the two miracle-working witnesses in Revelation 11,4-6. But here they are talking on a mountain, and the allusion must be plain. Both conversed with the Lord on Mount Horeb. The Moses tradition is extensive, but centres on Exodus chapters 19, 24 and 33-36. Elijah flees from Jezebel, and comes after a 40-day fast to Horeb the Mount of God, where he too receives direct instructions from the Lord (1 Kings 19). The patristic interpreters are in no doubt who it was that Moses met on Horeb/Sinai. Justin Martyr, for instance, goes to some length to prove that the one who appeared to Moses at the bush, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is also the one who was begotten at the beginning by God as a rational power, "who is called by the Holy Spirit 'Glory of God', and sometimes 'Son' and sometimes 'Wisdom', sometimes 'God', sometimes 'Lord' and 'Word' . . ." (*Dialogue* 61,1; cf. 60,5). Irenaeus in a more complicated argument (*Adv. haereses* 4,20,9) takes the statement of Exodus 33,11 in a special sense: "The Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend". He makes the subject unambiguously the Word, but deduces that Moses did not see the face of God at that time. He takes Exodus 33,20-22 as a promise for the future, "Stand in the high place of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand. But when my glory passes by, then you will see my back parts; but my face will not be seen by you, for no man sees God and will live." This indicates both that man cannot see God, and that Moses would see him in his human advent in the high place of the rock; the last was fulfilled when "face to face he (the Lord) conversed with him in his human advent on the mountain height, with Elijah also present, as the Gospel reports, finally fulfilling his ancient promise". I cite these patristic passages not for their specific arguments, but to illustrate how a century after Mark it was simply taken for granted that the Lord of Moses on Sinai was personally identical with Jesus Christ. The Marcan text as it stands suggests that Mark thought so too.

The obvious reason for this assertion stands in the divine word which is the climax of the vision, "This is my beloved (or unique) Son, hear him" (9,7), followed by the emphatic statement that they looked round (dare one suggest that Mark implies, "to see who was meant"?), "and they no longer saw anyone any more but Jesus alone with them" (9,8). Both Matthew and Luke in different ways strengthen the formula about the beloved Son, but to the patient reader of Mark it is hardly necessary. Already at the baptism John has (in the guise of Elijah) confessed himself unworthy to untie Jesus' sandal-thong (1,6-7), and Jesus was declared by God to be "my Son, my beloved, with you I am well pleased" (1,11). Now the same words are said to the disciples, but with a possible reminiscence of Dt. 18,15, where Moses says, "The Lord your God will raise up for you from your brothers a prophet like me; him you shall hear". Not a prophet like Moses, but a unique Son is now to be heard, whatever value was and is set upon Moses and Elijah. We are in the same complex of thought as when the popular views of Jesus are listed at 8,28: "(Some say) John the Baptist, other Elijah, others, one of the prophets," which the story contrasts with the apostolic confession, "You are the Christ," and with Jesus' own prediction of the sufferings of the Son of Man (8,29-31). This all suggests that as Son Jesus is of unique authority, superior to the prophets.

But my suggestion goes further. For Mark the Beloved Son was the one Moses and Elijah had known on Horeb as "the Lord". Here the argument begins with patristic sources like Justin and Irenaeus, and asks why this assumption of theirs should not be correct. There are some New Testament texts elsewhere which point the same way. I confine myself to a couple of examples, one certain but perhaps late, one less certain but early. At John 12,39-41 the evangelist explains the unbelief of the Jews by quoting the divine blinding and hardening predicted in Isaiah 6,9-10, concluding, "Isaiah said this because (or, when) he had seen his glory, and he spoke of him". This certainly alludes to Isaiah 6,1, "I saw the Lord, seated on a high and exalted throne, and the house was full of his glory". John thus identifies the *Kyrios* whom Isaiah saw with Jesus Christ. The less certain but early instance is 1 Cor. 10,4, where Paul alludes to the rabbinic legend of the rolling rock which supplied water to Israel in the desert. But Paul asserts that it was a spiritual drink from a spiritual rock, "and the rock was Christ". The uncertainty arises because this may be an allegorical interpretation of the Exodus story rather than an assertion that Christ personally was either the rock or the Lord who gave it. But it is clear enough to support the possibility that Mark believed that he was the Lord who met the prophets on Sinai. We might add one further text from Mark himself. At 12,35-37 Jesus answers his opponents with the unanswered question, "How can the scribes say that Messiah is David's son? David himself said by the Holy Spirit, 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right, while I put your enemies under my feet'. David calls him Lord; so how is he his Son?" So the Christ who sits at the right hand of God's power (cf. Mk. 14,62) is David's Lord, superior to him. It is but a small step to demonstrating him superior to the angels with other Psalm verses like, "Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever," and, "You at the beginning, Lord, founded the earth," which we find in Heb. 1,8-13 (Ps. 44,7/44,6; 101,26/102,25). There is no reason to doubt that Mark would accept such reasoning, and allow that Christ is a pre-existent Lord and God, reigning beside the Father, and speaking to the prophets of old.

There is one feature of the Moses material in Mk. 9 which confirms this interpretation. Peter asks the silly, terrified question, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here, so should we make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah?". Now what would Moses be doing with a tent, in the proximity of a cloud of divine glory? The cloud already suits the mountain, as at

Exodus 24,15-16, "Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days, and on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud." But once the tent of witness, or tent of meeting, was finished, following the design given by the Lord on the mountain, it becomes the place where Moses regularly meets the Lord face to face: "When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the door of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses. And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the door of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, every man at his tent door. Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Exodus 33,9-11). In the remaining chapters of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers the cloud abides as God's presence in the midst of the camp, and Israel moves only when the cloud lifts and leads them. If we now apply the pattern to Mark's story, we find Peter suggesting that the right response is to do as Moses' assistants did, and make tents, one for each of the three visionaries. He did not know what to say, because they were terrified. There may be a reminiscence of Exodus 34,30, where Aaron and the elders are afraid to come near Moses as he descends from the mountain with his face shining. But the point is that Peter's suggestion equates Jesus with Moses and Elijah. He is in communion with God on a mountain; he is transfigured, like Moses, by the experience. The divine presence is to be restored to Israel threefold, with Jesus, Moses and Elijah. But the suggestion calls forth the rebuke of God himself from the glory-cloud: Jesus is not a prophet, but an only Son, and is to be uniquely heard. When the cloud clears, there is no speaker and no prophet, but only Jesus. Peter is thus informed (though naturally in Mark he remains confused even afterwards) that he has misinterpreted what he has seen. Conversation with Moses and Elijah on the mountain does not make Jesus like them; he is the Lord with whom they converse. The Lord of Sinai, and the Lord of glory in the tent, is the divine Son. And the divine Son is Jesus himself, the suffering Son of Man.

That is the core of the matter. One could look to Matthew for some confirmation, though he does not differ significantly from Mark. He makes Jesus' face shine like the sun (17,2); he relieves Peter of blame, and makes his suggestion more polite ("if you wish", 17,4); he moves the terror to follow the divine voice, when the disciples fall on their faces (17,6) like Ezekiel (Ezk. 1,28) and Daniel (Dn. 10,9), and they have to be raised by Jesus' voice and touch, like those prophetic visionaries (Mt. 17,7 with Ezk. 2,1-2; Dn. 10,10-11); and the divine voice is deliberately assimilated to that of 3,17 by the addition, "in whom I am pleased". The literary finish is more serene, lacking the force and angularity of Mark, and ironing out some of the clues to the meaning. But for Matthew as for Mark, any typology between Moses and Christ is one in which Christ is Moses' Lord, able to overthrow by his mere word the things laid down of old time. There is perhaps force in the very title "Lord", which Peter uses at 17,4 instead of Mark's "Rabbi".

Looking at the older books on the gospels on which I was brought up, I found little to help me. It does not help much to discuss whether the story was originally a resurrection appearance or not, even if there are some overtones of resurrection, especially in Matthew. Nor does it help to consider what "actually" happened. It certainly does not help to be told moralistically that the only purposes of religious experience is to make a person hotter on good works once he gets down from the mountain into the "real" world (falsely so-called). What has helped me both as student and preacher has been a glimpse, which Mark especially gives me, of Christ crucified as the Lord of glory, whose voice is the "I am" of the burning bush, and the thunder of Sinai, and the still small voice which Elijah hears in his despair. That is the meat of true theology.