

The Glory on the Mountain: The Episode of the Transfiguration of Jesus*

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The starting point of the transfiguration of Jesus is the choice of Jesus himself. He had announced a destiny of suffering and death and, then, was faced with rejection of his words by his disciples, especially Peter. Now, they must know by themselves what 'God's views' are. The fundamental issue is whether Jesus' announcement really corresponds to the divine will. The answer will come from heaven: the disciples will be the privileged witnesses of the transfiguration granted to Jesus. He will appear as a heavenly figure, flanked by Moses and Elijah and thus preceding them. Peter would like to honour the three figures and prolong the wonderful vision making three dwelling-places, which recall the heavenly dwellings. But he does not realize that Jesus had announced a tragic destiny that falls within God's design. So, God has to speak. After the cloud will cover the three heavenly figures, the divine voice will address the disciples making it clear to them who Jesus is (God's Son) and what they must do (listen to Jesus, namely, accept his announcement of suffering and death).

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1. Two Theophanies: Baptism and Transfiguration

'There is a profound and intimate link between the baptism and the transfiguration. In both of them ... the mystery of the personality of Jesus manifests itself.' This affirmation of Albert Schweitzer¹ deserves to be the starting point of the present contribution.² Indeed, the only two episodes in which the text of

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1 *Das Messianitäts- und Leidensgeheimnis: Eine Skizze des Lebens Jesu* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1901) 143.

2 During the 62nd Congress of the SNTS (Sibiu, 2007), I discussed the subject of the baptism of Jesus ('Pourquoi Jésus a-t-il reçu le baptême de Jean?', *NTS* 54 [2008] 355–74).

the synoptic Gospels mentions an intervention by the divine voice are the theophany at the river Jordan and the theophany on the high, unnamed, mountain. Moreover, Jesus constitutes the centre and focus of both scenes insofar as in each of them he is designated, by the heavenly voice, as God's beloved Son. Additionally, in the episode of the baptism a heavenly being, the Spirit, descends upon Jesus at the moment he arises from the water, while on the mountain, after Jesus' appearance is changed, two heavenly figures—Moses and Elijah—appear and begin speaking with him.

In both episodes³ there is (a) a clearly historical setting to the events prior to the theophany as such, (b) some gestures and signs relating to Jesus within this theophany, as well as (c) an auditory core in which the divine voice proclaims the identity of Jesus as Son of God. The historical setting prior to the theophany (a) consists first of the journey of Jesus to the Jordan for John the Baptist to immerse him in the river and, secondly, the image of Jesus the rabbi, who, in the region of Caesarea, takes three of his disciples with him up a mountain, a typical place of encounter with God. The gestures and signs (b) on the part of God that are attached to each vision are, in the case of the baptism, the opened heavens and the dove that descends from them, and, in the case of the transfiguration, the heavenly transformation undergone by Jesus ('he was transfigured') and the appearance of two well-known figures who dwell in heaven, Moses and Elijah. The auditory element (c) is realized through the divine voice uttered from the heavens (baptism) or from a cloud (transfiguration) and confirms what the gestures had already shown: the ultimate identity of Jesus is seen in his membership of the divine world and specifically in the uniquely close relationship Jesus, as Son, enjoys with the Father. Each revelation, the one at the Jordan and the one on the high mountain, thus, has two stages of development: visual and auditory. The difference, which is what justifies the existence of two theophanies with such similar content, is the change in the recipient of what is seen and heard: Jesus is the one who 'sees' at the Jordan (Mark 1.10), the disciples are those who witness all the events that occur on the high mountain (Mark 9.2b, 2d, 4a, 5b, 7a, 7d, 8: they are mentioned seven times!). The theophany at the Jordan happens before Jesus alone. In contrast, the theophany on the high mountain happens before the three disciples, while Jesus, transfigured, remains part of what they

The present contribution about the transfiguration of Jesus is in continuity with the previous one.

- 3 In our case one must exclude the vision of Jesus of Satan's fall (Luke 10.18) and the events that take place after the death of Jesus, which affect the natural world (cosmic phenomena) and the human world (appearance of heavenly beings, and especially of the risen Jesus, with messages to those who will receive them). On Luke 10.18, see my *Jesus: An Uncommon Journey: Studies on the Historical Jesus* (WUNT 2/288; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010) 277–80.

see, on the other, celestial, side, accompanied by Moses and Elijah. In both cases, the events depend on the intervention of the Father who directs the action and makes it possible.

The transfiguration is reported by all three synoptic Gospels (Mark 9.2–8 par. Matt 17.1–8 par. Luke 9.28–36). The oldest account is that of Mark,⁴ which Matthew follows closely with some easily identifiable modifications,⁵ while Luke introduces a significant number of elements that, as in Matthew, might have come from the oral tradition or might reflect editorial interests. Nevertheless, the account in Mark contains some features that are generally agreed to be the result of editing: the adverb κατ' ἰδίαν (9.2c), the precedence of Elijah over Moses (9.4), the introduction to Peter's intervention (9.5a), the comment on this intervention (9.6). There are some doubts regarding the specific form—not the content—of the chronological indication at the beginning (9.2a) and, again, over the specific form—not the content—of the words of the divine voice (9.7c). On the other hand, the names of the three disciples (9.2a) and the metaphor of the fuller (9.3) must be regarded as part of the earliest tradition. As a result, in Mark's account there are three narrative sub-units, which without doubt belong to this earliest tradition and through which the narrative thread of the episode runs: the transfiguration of Jesus, to which Moses and Elijah are added (v. 4), Peter's intervention (v. 5b), and the revelation given by the divine voice that issues from the cloud (v. 7). These three elements constitute a rather firm critical base for the setting of the episode of the transfiguration within the context of the life of Jesus.

2. Traditions and Analogies

2.1. Traditions

Difficulty in interpreting the episode of the transfiguration is especially obvious when one re-examines scholarly positions concerning its literary genre and the traditions that might have given rise to it. The results of *Formgeschichte*-based analysis are somewhat disappointing. D. Zeller includes them under an epigraph which he ironically calls 'aporias of interpretation',⁶ and C. Focant endorses the conclusion of Ansaldi-Cuvillier: 'the account [of the

4 Cf. U. B. Müller, 'Die christologische Absicht des Markusevangeliums und die Verklärungsgeschichte', *ZNW* 64 (1973) 159–63; J. M. Nützel, *Die Verklärungserzählung im Markusevangelium. Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (FB 6; Würzburg: Echter, 1973).

5 See U. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus (Matt 8–17)* (EKKNT I/2; Zürich/Einsiedeln/Köln: Benzinger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1990).

6 Cf. D. Zeller, 'Bedeutung und religionsgeschichtlicher Hintergrund der Verwandlung Jesu (Markus 9:2–8)', *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus* (ed. B. Chilton and C. A. Evans; Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2002) 303–21, here 303–7, with a comprehensive bibliography.

transfiguration] to some extent eludes classification'.⁷ However, one must also say that an approach based on *Redaktionsgeschichte*, which tries to distinguish various layers in an attempt to sketch out an earlier form of the episode, has not led to certain or widely accepted conclusions.⁸ In fact, attempts to characterize the pericope have made it veer from one extreme to the other: an Easter appearance transposed to the life of Jesus for messianic ends (Wellhausen, Bultmann), a modified account of the ascension, in the context of which the miracle is the epiphany of Jesus himself (Theissen), a 'story about Jesus' that may appropriately be categorized as 'myth' (Dibelius, Bornkamm), a vision of the disciples turned into a narrative event (Harnack), a particular type of 'Christological story (*Legende*)' (Luz). All this shows that in the history of interpretation the transfiguration episode has often not passed the test of historicity.

The results are no better once we start looking at the underlying traditions.⁹ Doubt remains because there is not a single tradition that can explain the origin of the episode. At best, examination of the traditions can clarify some, often minor, aspects of the account. Although tradition might seem to explain everything in the Gospel account, detailed analysis reveals the differences that exist between that account and the underlying traditions. The most striking example relates undoubtedly to the typology of Moses and the exodus tradition. A reading of chs. 24, 33, and 34 of Exodus can lead to the conclusion that, in the transfiguration, Jesus is presented as the new Moses and the prophet of the last times (for this last aspect, compare Deut 18.15, 'it is to him that you will listen', with 'listen to him' of Mark 9.7).¹⁰ Indeed, the parallels do not seem to

7 Cf. C. Focant, *L'évangile selon Marc* (CBNT 2; Paris: Cerf, 2004) 338.

8 Thus, according to Müller ('Die christologische Absicht'), there would have been an old Jewish account (Mark 9.2ab, 7) that elevated Jesus to the status of Messiah and prophet of the last times, to which a Hellenistic account presenting the epiphany of Jesus as the glorified Son of man would have been attached (vv. 2c-6, 8). A similar distinction between a former Palestinian account, which would have underlined the condition of Jesus as servant (!), and a Hellenistic milieu that would have been responsible for the christology of the Son of God, is found in F. Hahn (quoted by J. Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, vol. 2 [EKKNT II/2; Zürich/Einsiedeln/Köln: Benzinger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen, 3rd ed. 1989] 35). In a rather similar way, Nützel, *Verklärungserzählung*, 167-87 and 236-54) makes a distinction on two levels: the source (vv. 3, 7a, 8 and partly vv. 2, 4), which would present Jesus as the Messiah, and Mark's redaction (vv. 5, 6, 7b and partly 2, 4), which would show his condition as Son of God by introducing a Mosaic typology. For his part, Öhler attributes vv. 2c, 3-4, 5b, 7, 8 to the tradition and vv. 2ab, 5a, 6 to Marcan redaction (cf. M. Öhler, 'Die Verklärung [Mark 9:1-8]: Die Ankunft der Herrschaft Gottes auf der Erde', *NovT* 38 [1996] 197-217, here 201). D. Zeller proposes to distinguish an old revelation scene, traceable in v. 4, and a subsequent narrative, as Mark has it now, the point of which would be v. 7 ('Bedeutung', 309, 318-20).

9 One can find an excellent summary of the different traditions that have been brought into the episode of the transfiguration in Luz's commentary on Matthew (*Matthäus*, II, 507-9).

10 D. F. Strauss was the first to establish the relationship between the figure of Moses and the transfigured Jesus. Many have followed suit. This does not mean that the episode of the

be lacking: the three who ascend Sinai with Moses, the mountain covered by cloud for six days, Moses called by the Lord from the cloud, Moses descending from Sinai with his face radiant after speaking with God. The informed reader can hardly be ignorant of the relationship between the events on Mount Sinai and the transfiguration on the high mountain.

However, the same reader will also be aware of the difference between the figure of Moses and that of Jesus: Moses ascends the mountain with three (Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu) but also with the seventy elders of Israel (Exod 24.1, 9) and with Joshua (24.13); the cloud does not cover the mountain when Jesus is transfigured;¹¹ in contrast to Moses,¹² Jesus descends from the mountain with his face unchanged: he has not spoken with God; rather, it is God who has spoken about him to the disciples after his appearance was changed.¹³ These observations lead us to the fundamental difference: if Jesus is to be compared with Moses, the comparison should not be with Moses the prophet who ascends the mountain but to the glorious, heavenly, Moses, who accompanies Jesus in his transfiguration. In fact it is the three disciples who 'see' the transfigured Jesus (comp. Mark 9.2: 'before them'), just as Moses and those who accompanied him 'saw the God of Israel' (Exod 24.9–10). With regard to the heavenly voice, it is the three disciples who hear it as it addresses them and tells them who Jesus really is (Mark 9.7). Again, at Sinai Moses spoke (λαλέω) with God

transfiguration must be conceived as a creation deriving from the Sinai traditions. Rather, it would have been interpreted in light of these traditions. This is the position of Davies and Allison in their commentary on Matthew. Cf. W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (ICC; 3 vols; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988, 1991, 1997) 2.694. See also D. C. Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993) 243–8. The article by A. del Agua interprets the story of the transfiguration as a midrash on the Exodus ('The Narrative of the Transfiguration as a Derashic Scenification of a Faith Confession [Mark 9.2 to 8]', *NTS* 39 [1993] 340–54). For his part, B. Chilton prefers to speak of an 'explosion of associations' in his article 'The Transfiguration: Dominical Assurance and Apostolic Vision', *NTS* 27 (1981) 115–24. Among other authors, see J. Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (StNTW; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993) 81–4.

- 11 According to Mark 9.7, the cloud 'came and overshadowed (ἐπισκιάζουσα) them (αὐτοῖς)' when Jesus was already transformed.
- 12 D. Zeller ('La métamorphose de Jésus comme épiphanie [Mc 9, 2–8]', *L'évangile exploré* [ed. A. Marchadour; FS S. Legasse; LD 166; Paris: Cerf, 1996] 167–86) points out that, in Jewish biblical literature, one does not find supernatural transformations of the face. The case of Moses (cf. Exod 34) is, nevertheless, quoted in Philo (*Vita Mosis* 2.70) and in Pseudo-Philo (*LAB* 12.1).
- 13 The transformation of Jesus is temporary. On the contrary, that of Moses persists. Moreover, Moses needs to put a veil on his face when he does not speak with God. In contrast, there is no veil mentioned in the episode of the transfiguration. On the other hand, in the case of Moses, nothing is said about the whiteness of his clothes (an element mentioned, with regard to Jesus, by the three synoptic accounts: Mark 9.3; Matt 17.2; Luke 9.29).

(Exod 34.29), whereas in the episode of the transfiguration he discusses (συλλαλέω) with Jesus (Mark 9.4). In conclusion, when one applies the typology of Moses to Jesus transfigured on the mountain, the differences seem to be greater than the resemblances. It is hardly possible, therefore, to maintain that in the account of the transfiguration Jesus is presented as the new Moses. Deuteronomy 18.15 does not alter this conclusion.¹⁴ In any case, even if some features from the exodus narratives might have inspired the synoptic accounts, especially in Luke,¹⁵ the episode of the transfiguration does not seem to have been based on the idea of Jesus as the new Moses.

A second example is the connection suggested by a good number of writers between the episode of the transfiguration and the festival of Tabernacles. In support of this idea are Peter's words to the transfigured Jesus who has just been joined by Moses and Elijah. Enraptured by what his eyes are contemplating, the disciple, in the name of the other two disciples as well, proposes setting up three tents for the three celestial figures: Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Moreover, as has been noted, the festival of Tabernacles, according to Lev 23.27, 34, was to be celebrated on the sixth day (the fifteenth of the seventh month) after the Day of Atonement (observed on the tenth day of the same month). One might argue, then, that the chronological indication at the beginning of the transfiguration episode ('six days later', Mark 9.2, par. Matt 17.1; 'about eight days after these words', Luke 9.28) brings the event into relationship with the festival of Tabernacles. The transfiguration would have occurred on the last of the eight days that the festival lasted (Lev 23.36) or on the sixth day of the same week, and should, therefore, be interpreted as having had

14 In Deut 18.15 Moses announces the arrival of a prophet whom God will raise and to whom it will be necessary to listen ('listen to him'). Since Holtzmann, that prophet was identified as the eschatological prophet who appears in Jewish apocalyptic (see John 7.40–41). In Acts 3.20–23 the text of Deuteronomy is quoted in connection with Jesus 'the Messiah that is destined for you' (Acts 3.20). We can, therefore, consider it a common *topos* in the christological interpretation of Scripture in early Christianity. In any event, the fact that the phrase 'listen to him' is attested by the three synoptics gives it a remarkable traditional 'weight', beyond the reference to a concrete biblical text. In addition, it would be insufficient to limit the divine voice to the proclamation of Jesus as Prophet or Messiah-Prophet (based on Deut 18.15) in a text that also presents Jesus as the beloved Son. As we shall see, Deut 18.15 seems to play no role in interpreting the words of the divine voice in Mark 9.7. In any case, the hypothetical reference to Deut 18.15 in Mark 9.7 does not justify the typology of Jesus as the new Moses.

15 Compare Exod 33.18 ('show me your own glory', δειξόν μοι τὴν σεαυτοῦ δόξαν, in Hebrew *hare'eni na' 'et kebodekha*, a phrase uttered by Moses, who wants to 'see' [*ra'ah*] God) and Luke 9.32 ('they saw his glory', εἶδον τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, where the glory that the disciples want to 'see' is not God's but Jesus'). Compare also Exod 24.18 ('Moses entered the cloud', εἰσῆλθεν Μωϋσῆς εἰς τὸ μέσον τῆς νεφέλης) and Luke 9.34 ('when they entered the cloud', ἐν τῷ εἰσελθεῖν αὐτοῦς εἰς τὴν νεφέλην). Let us note, nevertheless, that neither of these two cases requires the typology of Jesus as the new Moses: in both cases, the relationship is between Moses and the disciples. In the same way that Moses wants to see the glory of God, the disciples are able to see the glory of Jesus.

messianic and eschatological significance.¹⁶ Peter would in this way have fulfilled the prophecy of Zech 14.16–19 about the festival of Tabernacles, according to which all the nations were to celebrate this festival in Jerusalem.¹⁷ Or, as Ch. Grappe believes, Peter, in the context of the festival of Tabernacles that Jesus and his disciples were, as good Jews, celebrating in the area of Caesarea, would have seen in the transfiguration of Jesus an absolutely clear sign of the great divine revelation, and his enthusiastic reaction to this would have been tangibly demonstrated in the proposed construction of the three tents.¹⁸

The issue turns on whether Peter's reference to the three tents should be read against the background of the Jewish festival of Tabernacles. The presence of the Greek term *σκηναί* is not decisive, since it does not function as a technical term.¹⁹ Moreover, the chronological data about the six or eight days at the beginning of the account do not inevitably relate to a Jewish holiday, let alone to the festival of Tabernacles, which would have coincided, according to the Jewish calendar, with the ascent by Jesus and his disciples of the high mountain. Consequently, the three synoptic accounts do not present clear evidence that demands an interpretation informed by reference to the festival of Tabernacles.²⁰ Clearly, what Peter says about the three tents deserves an explanation, which should be sought within the framework of his reaction to two uncommon and fascinating events: the transformation undergone by Jesus and the appearance alongside

16 'Les réalités préfigurées dans les rites de la fête s'accomplissent... l'épisode de la transfiguration manifeste l'irruption du temps messianique' (H. Riesenfeld, *Jésus transfiguré. L'arrière plan du récit évangélique de la transfiguration de Notre Seigneur* [ANSU 16; Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1947] 343). According to Riesenfeld, if the just begin to live in tents, a full eschatology is in view: the tents built on earth are an image of divine *sukkot* (p. 337). The messianic-eschatological symbolism, underlined with liturgical accents like the interpretations that one finds in the Fathers of the Church, was accepted by Lohmeyer (1921), Daniélou, Daube, and Le Déaut, who elaborates the tent motif in the Palestinian Targum ('Actes 7, 48 et Matthieu 17, 4 [par.], à la lumière du Targum Palestinien', *RSR* 52 [1964] 85–90). Cf. also J. Ratzinger-Benedikt XVI, *Jesus von Nazareth*, vol. 1 (Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 2007) 353–65.

17 This is the interpretation proposed by Lohmeyer and Baltensweiler. Cf. H. Baltensweiler, *Die Verklärung Jesu. Historisches Ereignis und synoptische Berichte* (ATANT 33; Zürich: Zwingli, 1959) 43–51.

18 Grappe quotes the Targum of Lev 23, where the tents become signs of the glory of God. See his work *D'un temple à l'autre. Pierre et l'Église primitive de Jérusalem* (EHPHr 71; Paris: PUF, 1992) 164–72, here 167.

19 In the Hebrew Bible, the word *sukkot* is not a technical term in the expression 'Feast of Tabernacles' (*hag sukkot*, in Greek ἑορτὴ σκηνοῶν) (Lev 23.34). Elsewhere, *sukkot* may alternate with *'oholim* and mean, for example, the tents of the fields of Israel (in Greek σκηναί). Cf. Num 16.25–26, about the tents of Kore, Dathan, and Abiram! In addition, σκηναί may be the translation of *mishkanot* (cf. Num 24.5: the 'residences' of Jacob).

20 This is the conclusion of B. Standaert: 'Rien n'invite, au niveau de Marc, à faire entrer ici le champ des associations autour de la fête des Tentés' (*Évangile selon Marc. Commentaire. Deuxième partie: Marc 6, 14 à 10, 52* [EB 61; Paris: Gabalda, 2010] 660).

him of Moses and Elijah. It is the vision of the three heavenly figures that provokes, in Peter, an unexpected, albeit understandable, reaction.

2.2. Analogies

If an appeal to the traditions does not lead to a generally satisfactory result,²¹ the search for possible analogies to the episode of the transfiguration is also limited in its yield. One has the impression of identifying correspondences that, at first sight, appear to be real parallels but, in the end, only represent a more or less general and allusive relationship. Nonetheless, such analogies do not cease to attract the attention of writers; they come in two types: those based on systems of apocalyptic and mystical representation, and those relating to the epiphany of a divine or celestial figure in human form.²²

The literature relating to the *Hechalot* and to visions of the heavenly throne has offered an alluring background for the transfiguration episode. Jesus would have been on the mountain where he would have had a mystical vision of the chariot of fire, that is, of the glorious throne of God, and would have shared this with the three accompanying disciples, who would thus have been initiated into this overwhelming experience.²³ The motif of the celestial journey, which has as its goal the receipt of revelations about the divine mysteries, is common in apocalyptic.²⁴ For example, it is said that Moses ascended from the mountain to the heavens,

21 The conclusion of U. Luz is sharp: 'Es gibt keinen Schlüssel in der Tradition, der sie ganz erschliesst' (*Matthäus*, II, 506). Luz distinguishes five traditional motifs, two of which have already been considered: Moses and the Exodus; the Feast of Tabernacles. The other three are the following: Mount Moriah (Gen 22.2, 12, 16); the royal enthronement (cf. Ps 2.7; Acts 13.33-34); the transformation of the body in the future resurrection, such as is described in Jewish apocalyptic and in Paul (1 Cor 15). One can add to these motifs the hypothesis of A. Standhartinger ('Jesus, Elija und Mose auf dem Berg. Traditionsgeschichtliche Überlegungen zur Verklärungsgeschichte [Mk 9, 2-8]', *BZ* 47 [2003] 66-85), according to which the fact that the two prophets, Elijah and Moses, appear on the mountain is a reference to the biblical and Jewish tradition of Sinai. The transfiguration would be a new story ('Neuerzählung') relating to the meeting of Moses and Elijah with God, but it would add a third person: Jesus (74). The latter hypothesis raises at least two difficulties: In contrast to the two prophets, Jesus does not meet God on the high mountain; what characterizes the revelation in the case of Moses (the cloud and the voice) is not true for the case of Elijah (81!). Consequently, the Sinai motif does not seem to explain satisfactorily the origin of the episode of the transfiguration.

22 See Zeller, 'Bedeutung', 313-18.

23 In his book on Jesus B. Chilton understands the transfiguration of Jesus as the great esoteric teaching that Jesus would have given his three favorite disciples. He writes: 'By sharing his vision with them, he shifted the centre of his teaching away from what can be discerned of God's Kingdom on earth to what can be experienced of the angelic pantheon around God's Throne'. Cf. B. Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography* (New York/London/Toronto/Sydney/Auckland: Doubleday, 2000) 192.

24 Cf. J. E. Fossum, 'Ascensio, Metamorphosis', *The Image of the Invisible God* (ed. J. E. Fossum; NTOA 30; Fribourg: Éditions de l'Université; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995)

where he underwent a glorification and, according to some texts, was enthroned and clothed in royal garments.²⁵

However, it is difficult to maintain this position in the face of the three synoptic texts relating to the transfiguration—and also 2 Pet 1.16–18. First of all, Jesus does not receive any revelation on the high mountain; rather, it is the three disciples who see the glory of the transfigured Jesus. The disciples are witnesses to what happens but do not undergo any transformation. They are simply recipients of a revelation about the identity of Jesus, and this revelation leads them to a profound understanding of the one whom they knew only as teacher and healer. Jesus, moreover, is not taken up to heaven and does not experience a mystical rapture or make a heavenly journey (such as that which Paul mentions in 2 Cor 12.2).²⁶ Despite all attempts to construct a strictly apocalyptic scenario from the pericope of the transfiguration, it remains resistant to such treatment. Although one can detect some elements that are shared with apocalyptic, or sometimes mystical, revelations, their presence does not mean that the episode should be interpreted as a revelation of an apocalyptic type.²⁷

Staying in the realm of analogies, attempts have been made to set the transfiguration of Jesus against a history of religions background and to include it in the category of an epiphany of a divinity in human form.²⁸ Neither texts nor examples are lacking. The stories of the gods and heroes of hellenistic and Roman antiquity offer many examples of epiphanies and metamorphoses that do not seem so distant from the Gospel episode. Following M. Dibelius, it may be recalled that very often the manifestation of a divine being that has taken on human form

71–94. The author quotes as examples of a heavenly journey that would have the mountain as a starting point *Apoc. Pet.* 17; *Asc. Isa.* 2.8; *T. Levi* 2.5–7.

25 Fossum affirms ('Ascensio, Metamorphosis', 83) that during the transfiguration, Jesus is enthroned as king and prophet with the mission of proclaiming God's divine will. But it is not clear that Mark 9.7 should be understood as an enthronement.

26 Regarding Fossum's interpretation which would make Moses and Elijah the ones who accompany the heavenly ascent of Jesus, Zeller correctly writes: 'von einem Aufstieg Jesu nach V. 2b nicht mehr die Rede ist' ('Bedeutung', 320).

27 M. Öhler traces the apocalyptic motifs typical of heavenly journeys in the episode of the transfiguration and concludes that one cannot speak here of a heavenly journey of Jesus ('Verklärung', 215). Indeed, one of the most notable elements of the episode is that neither Jesus nor the disciples travel anywhere, in the body or out of the body (2 Cor 12.2). According to Öhler, these apocalyptic motifs were introduced into the tradition before Mark.

28 The reference here is that of M. Frenschkowski, *Offenbarung und Epiphanie. II: Die verborgene Epiphanie in Spätantike und frühem Christentum* (WUNT 2/80; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996) 184–7. See also S. S. Lee, *Jesus' Transfiguration and the Believers' Transformation* (WUNT 2/265; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) 21–36, and the work of E. Pax, *EPIPHANEA: Ein religionsgeschichtlicher Beitrag zur biblischen Theologie* (MThS.H 10; Munich: Karl Zink, 1955).

results in a scene where the divine being's glory, and, thus, his or her true identity, is revealed. At this moment, the divine beauty illuminates face, eyes, and clothing. For example, A. Yarbro Collins quotes an incident from the *Odyssey* where the hero, who has arrived at Ithaca, is protected by the goddess Athene, disguised first as a young girl carrying an earthenware jar and then as a young shepherd. Finally, the goddess appears as a tall, beautiful, woman, who is skilled in making beautiful things by hand.²⁹ In the Jewish apocalyptic world, too, a heavenly personality, such as the eschatological judge, can be presented as a marvelous figure, radiant as the sun, similar to a son of God, in other words, to an angel.³⁰

However, when these attractive analogies are applied specifically to the interpretation of the transfiguration episode the results are questionable. One might, for example, like to read into Peter's proposal to build three tents (Mark 9.5) his desire to commemorate the triple epiphany with the construction of three sanctuaries where one could offer worship to Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Indeed, according to the hellenistic model, an epiphany is often associated with the founding of a particular cult.³¹ Having said that, it is not obvious that it is Peter's intention on the mountain to establish such a cult. Apart from this, as already pointed out, the episode of the transfiguration differs from the motif of the return to the celestial world. From Mark 9.2–8 one can deduce only that Jesus remained transfigured during a rather short time and that, after that, in contrast to Moses and Elijah, he did not undertake a heavenly journey or return to heaven but stayed on earth, alone, with the three disciples, after his appearance had returned to its 'normal' state.

In short, the traditions and analogies that one may detect in relation to the transfiguration demonstrate its historical and cultural context and origins but do not lead to conclusive results. Another type of analysis is called for, which takes account of the data provided by the three synoptic accounts and which, at the same time, does not break the relationship between the transfiguration episode and other episodes that are probably associated with it. As has already been suggested, our interpretation will be based on the relationship of Jesus and the disciples, especially Peter. This relationship develops through a sequence of events that take place in the area of Caesarea Philippi and that are associated with a chronological datum ('six days after', Mark 9.2) that appears to provide a temporal connection between these events: Jesus' question to the disciples and Peter's answer and confession of faith (Mark 8.27–29), Jesus' announcement to

29 See *Od.* 13.222–23 and 288–89. Cf. A. Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 2010) 418. It is not uncommon that the divinity, when it returns to the heavenly world, leaves a sign behind that can be recognized. Ovid writes: *signa dedit venisse deum* (*Metam.* 1.220) (text quoted by Zeller, 'Bedeutung', 316 n. 51).

30 *T. Abr.* (rec. A) 12.5. This text is quoted by Zeller, 'Bedeutung', 316.

31 Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 418–19, 424.

the disciples, Peter's rejection of Jesus' words, and Jesus' harsh response (Mark 8.31–33), Jesus' ascent of a mountain, with the three disciples, and transfiguration, witnessed by Moses and Elijah, Peter's intervention, the heavenly voice, and the abrupt end of the vision (Mark 9.2–8). We may take as the basis of the analysis, then, three narrative units from the Gospel according to Mark (8.27–29; 8.31–33; 9.2–8).

3. The Choice of Jesus and the Answer of God

3.1. *The Choice of Jesus*

The episode of the transfiguration begins with Jesus' decision to go up a high mountain accompanied only³² by three disciples: Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, James and John.³³ Indeed, if the material in vv. 2ab, 5b and 7d must be understood together, one may consider as an element from the earliest tradition the fact that Jesus decides to take three of his disciples (Peter, James, and John) with him onto the high mountain.³⁴ What needs to be clarified is the purpose of this choice.

Although at the outset it is Jesus who makes the decision to ascend the mountain, it is not so obvious that he has *also* asked God to be transfigured in front of

32 As already mentioned, the majority of authors admit that the expression κατ' ἰδίαν ('apart') belongs to the Marcan redaction (seven times in Mark). But the direction of the sentence remains the same: only the three were selected, among the Twelve, to accompany Jesus.

33 The hypothesis of Wenham and Moses, according to which this James would be the brother of the Lord (cf. Gal 2.9) is, as the authors themselves acknowledge, 'admittedly speculative' (158). Cf. D. Wenham and A. D. A. Moses, "'There are some standing here...': Did They Become the 'Reputed Pillars' of the Jerusalem Church? Some Reflections on Mark 9:1, Galatians 2:9 and the Transfiguration', *NovT* 36 (1994) 146–63. This interpretation has been accepted by Yarbro Collins (*Mark*, 421 n. 43). However, in the Gospels, James and John (always in that order) can only be the two brothers, sons of Zebedee (see Mark 3.17; 5.37; 10.35). In addition, there is no indication that James, the brother of the Lord, is one of the Twelve. Concerning the three disciples in the group of Twelve, see my *Jesus: A Biography* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2011) 257–63.

34 The location of the mount of the transfiguration is unknown. The highest mountain in the region of Caesarea/Banias is certainly Mount Hermon (the preferred solution of G. W. E. Nickelsburg based on the Second Book of Enoch and Testament of Levi), but one could also consider one of the many heights of Golan (G. Dalmann). Cf. Öhler, 'Die Verklärung', 203 n. 22. The identification with Mount Tabor—venerable for its Byzantine origin in the fourth century and for the influence it has had in Christian iconography—implies that Jesus left the region of Caesarea and, after six days (Mark 9.2 par. Matt 17.1), was already in Galilee (cf. Matt 17.22). It is better to preserve the imprecision of Mark 9.2, which mentions 'a mountain' (ὄρος ὑψηλόν). Cf. Standaert, *Marc*, 649–50. See also T. Hilhorst, 'The Mountain of Transfiguration in the New Testament and in Later Tradition', *The Land of Israel in Bible, History, and Theology* (ed. J. van Ruiten and J. C. de Vos; FS E. Noort; Leiden: Brill, 2009) 317–38.

the three disciples accompanying him. The change comes through an agent that desires and achieves the transformation, the agent here being God himself. The transformative power must be identified with a divine intervention: it is God who decided that Jesus was to be transfigured on a high mountain. The link between mountains and revelations, visions, or mystical experiences on the part of human beings, is widely attested in the most varied religious systems and this link is repeated in the episode of the transfiguration of Jesus. In a general way, therefore, one may say that the ascent of Jesus and the disciples to the 'high mountain' has as its goal an encounter with the divine. The combination of the ascent of the mountain with the motif of prayer, which is found explicitly in Luke, only serves to reinforce this idea. Moreover, there is a striking contrast between Luke, on the one hand, and Mark and Matthew, on the other. Whereas in Luke 9.28 it is said that Jesus 'ascended the mountain' (ἀνέβη εἰς τὸ ὄρος), in Mark 9.2 par. Matt 17.1 it is stated that Jesus 'takes them (the three disciples) onto a high mountain' (ἀναφέρει αὐτοὺς εἰς ὄρος ὑψηλόν). In Mark and Matthew the goal of the ascent has, to begin with, to do with the disciples³⁵ and only then to the person of Jesus, who, it appears, does not through this ascent seek or expect anything specific for himself, even though transfiguration is, in fact, awaiting him: God will change his appearance.

It is here that we must find the reason why Jesus considered it necessary that his three closest disciples should have such a 'powerful', mystical, experience of encounter with God. The answer can only be in the preceding events in the area of Caesarea Philippi. This backward glance at earlier events is expressed in, and justified by, the chronological reference, already noted, in Mark 9.2 par. Matt 17.1 ('six days afterwards') or in Luke 9.28 ('eight days afterwards'). Leaving aside the disputed significance of the figure (six or eight), the three synoptic Gospels agree in setting the transfiguration a few days after the events that had previously occurred.

Jesus had asked the disciples to make a pronouncement about his identity, after he had asked the same question with regard to the opinion of other people. But it is Peter who in answering reflects an opinion that all seem to share.³⁶ In the same way, after Jesus' teaching about his destiny—which, according to Mark 9.31 par. Matt 16.21 par. Luke 9.22, includes suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection on the third day³⁷—Peter takes the initiative in drawing

35 Gnlika (*Markus*, 2.32) notes that the episode in Mark is conceived as a revelation to the disciples. On this point, he agrees with Bultmann, Klostermann, and others. But this feature is so present in the three synoptic accounts that it must be considered a traditional element.

36 Cf. R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 166. This author points out that Peter is not speaking on behalf of others (like a 'spokesman') but expresses the opinion that all share.

37 The reference to the resurrection is ambiguous: Is it the resurrection of Jesus on the third day or the general resurrection at the end of time? In Mark 9.10 the disciples seem to discuss the latter, since there is no mention here of the third day.

Jesus aside and reacting to this teaching with a reprimand. Just as all the disciples had shared in the confession of faith that Jesus is the Messiah, we may say that they all now share in the refusal to accept his destiny of suffering and death. All, accordingly, have become 'deserving' of Jesus' counter-reprimand.³⁸

Jesus' harsh words to Peter and, by extension, the other disciples, show how seriously Jesus takes their reaction: 'Get behind me, Satan, for your views are not those of God, but those of men' (Mark 8.33 par. Matt 16.23, where there is also the phrase 'you are obstructing me'). The problem thus comes fully to the surface: Peter and the other disciples have lapsed into a kind of insubordination about what Jesus says concerning his future, apparently using what seems to be a decisive argument: God could not wish for Jesus' death! Jesus is mistaken when he proclaims for himself a future of suffering and death!³⁹ The problem concerns, then, the interpretation of the will of God.

After these events filled with tension between Jesus and the disciples, a sign is needed, an explanation, a legitimizing of Jesus' intentions and those of God. It is not enough to put Peter in his place with a vigorous 'Get behind me, Satan!' It is not enough to remind Peter that his thoughts are far from the views and thoughts of God. Any trace of rebuke has to disappear from the hearts of the disciples, who have been thrown into consternation by the destiny of suffering and death that awaits the one whom they themselves have come to recognize as the Messiah. And the only way to do this is to lead the disciples—at least some of them, the most important, the 'leaders' of the group—to an experience of encounter with God, of an as yet unknown kind. God has to speak to them, God must take them to an unquestioning recognition of Jesus, the Jesus who has announced that he would undergo terrible suffering and would die. Jesus trusts in God's response. He does not know how it will occur but he is fully confident that the ascent of the mountain will be associated with an action of the Father, to which only three disciples will be privy.⁴⁰

3.2. *The Answer of God*

God's answer comes suddenly and unpredictably. Jesus undergoes a transformation in his clothing (Mark) and, almost certainly, in his face (Matthew and Luke). The transformation in Jesus' appearance occurs 'before them' (ἔμπροσθεν

38 'Jesus thinks the other disciples also deserving of the rebuke he delivers to Peter' (Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 167).

39 The disciples do not align against Jesus nor do they defend themselves: Jesus announces a future tragedy *only* for himself; his future differs from that of the disciples (in fact, they will not die with him). The refusal of the disciples is, thus, not a kind of mutiny! The question they raise comes finally to this: What is the will of God?

40 There is not, according to Jesus, a specific reference to the mode of action, intervention, or revelation that God will choose. Jesus does not envision anything concrete. Thus, the choice of three disciples has nothing to do with an esoteric teaching that he would have 'prepared'. Jesus will simply tell them that they should not relate to anyone the experience they have lived (Mark 9.9).

αὐτῶν) (Mark 9.2c par. Matt 17.2a), that is, in front of the three disciples. Mark 9.3 uses the image of the fuller who bleaches garments. Matthew 17.2 refers in general to the dazzling of the sun and the whiteness of the light.⁴¹ Clearly, the image of the fuller is more direct, expressive, and concrete, and seems to depend on eyewitness material from the oral tradition.⁴² The point of the comparison is conveyed by the words ‘on earth’ (ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, Mark 9.3): no fuller here on earth can bleach garments in such a way; consequently, Jesus’ appearance shows that he now belongs to the heavenly world.⁴³ The identification of Jesus as a heavenly character, the result of God’s acting upon him, is to be complemented by the appearance of these two figures. Their appearance, too, depends on the divine will. Moses and Elijah arrive, even if this is not stated explicitly, because it was God’s intention for them to do so: they are God’s envoys to the transfigured Jesus. Their primary and most obvious identity is that of heavenly figures, inhabitants of the heavenly dwelling-places.

Moreover, Moses and Elijah are undoubtedly the two best-known figures of this type, much more so than Enoch, who was also taken up to heaven (cf. Gen 5.24). They have an important presence in the Scriptures, Moses being the prophet associated with the Law (indeed, the author of the Pentateuch according to Jewish tradition) and Elijah the prophet connected with miracles and healings (in particular the miracle of the fire that fell from heaven).⁴⁴ Their lives and their exploits are known, above all the fact that they were taken up to heaven without experiencing death, and the three disciples apparently recognize them immediately.⁴⁵ The disciples are the recipients and the witnesses of this irruption of

41 Cf. Rev 1,16: ‘his face (of the Son of man) was like the sun shining at its brightest’.

42 Many authors consider that Mark 9.3 is traditional. Zeller notes that three words of this verse (στίβω, γναφεύς, λευκαίνω) are *hapax* in Mark. See Zeller, ‘Bedeutung’, 308 n. 18. For her part, Yarbrow Collins reports the views of Wellhausen, according to whom Matthew and Luke have omitted the full image because it was ‘too plebeian’ (*Mark*, 422). It would be better to say ‘too colloquial’. In any case, it is an image that recalls the eyewitness’ testimony of the event.

43 Öhler concludes: ‘Hier ist von himmlischer Existenz die Rede’ (‘Verklärung’, 204).

44 On Moses as a prophet, see Deut 18.15 (‘A prophet like me will the Lord raise up’) and Pseudo-Philo (*LAB* 35.6), who calls him ‘primus omnium prophetarum’. The synoptic tradition attests that, among the contemporaries of Jesus, some wondered if Jesus was not Elijah (cf. Mark 6.15; 8.28) and Jesus himself said that Elijah is the eschatological prophet (Mark 9.12). Deut 18 is applied, in the writings of Qumran (4Q175), to the eschatological prophet conceived as the forerunner of the priestly and davidic messiahs (1QS 9.11). However, as Standhartinger states (‘Jesus, Eliza und Mose’, 68–9), one cannot find the two characters presented together as eschatological prophets (the only exception would be the Midrash Rabbah, *Debarim* 3.17, rather late). Therefore, it is difficult to envisage that the presence of Moses and Elijah could be interpreted as the arrival of two prophets of the last times. In contrast, the change of the order in Mark 9.4 (‘Elijah appeared to them with Moses’) and the mention of the Kingdom that comes (Mark 9.1) show the importance that the Gospel of Mark attributes to the eschatological component.

45 Gnlika (*Markus*, 2.34) says that Moses and Elijah, according to biblical tradition and the popular belief that mentions their ascension to heaven, were more likely to become ‘the

the heavenly realm: Jesus' transfiguration and the appearance of Moses and Elijah occur in front of them, they are the ones destined to behold this vision of the three heavenly figures.⁴⁶ It could be said that the disciples understood Jesus to be the central figure, since the two others had come to meet him: Jesus has not undertaken a journey to heaven; it is Moses and Elijah who have come from heaven down to the earth. Despite this, the greatest honour pertains to the one who has stayed in his place, not to those who go to meet him: Jesus receives, from the two most important prophetic figures in the Scriptures, both witness and honour.⁴⁷

The glory of Jesus shines on the high mountain. God has spoken to the disciples: Jesus has been formally shown as a heavenly and glorious figure, close to God and belonging to the heavenly realm. He is the Messiah of Israel, as Peter had recognized (Mark 8.29), but is also someone who belongs to the divine world, and it is God who proclaims him to be such by transfiguring him (9.3). Jesus' identity in its profoundest aspect is not of this earth, and his choice of a future beset by suffering and death, which he has openly expressed to the

interlocutors' ('Gesprächspartner') of the Transfigured. So also Focant: 'Dans le contexte socio-culturel de l'époque, on ne peut rêver de meilleurs témoins de l'identité profonde de Jésus' (*Marc*, 335). One may even wonder how the two characters make themselves known to the disciples. Byzantine representation of the transfiguration has solved this issue with a precise iconography: Moses is identified by the rays that emerge from his head and by the two tablets of the Law that he holds in his hands (Exod 34.29); Elijah is the man praying for fire to come down from heaven (1 Kgs 18.36–38) and, therefore, sometimes carries a flaming sword in his hand (Sir 48.1). Nevertheless, the disciples do not seem to hesitate in identifying one and the other. Note also that in the frescoes of the synagogue of Dura Europos (third century), Moses is depicted with the tablets of the Law he received from God on Mount Sinai and Elijah appears in the scene of Mount Carmel, when God sent fire down from heaven and burned the sacrifice and the altar dedicated to the Lord. Perhaps the two characters are recognized through these two major events, which both occur on mountains. Thus, their identification, on a high mountain, becomes quite plausible from the point of view of the disciples. On Dura Europos, see J. Gutman, ed., *The Dura-Europos Synagogue: A Re-Evaluation (1932–1972)* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1991).

46 The account of the transfiguration, in Mark, is built almost entirely from the perspective of the disciples (Standhartinger, 'Jesus, Elija und Mose', 76–7).

47 It is not surprising that the weight of the testimony, expressed by the appearance of three heavenly persons, has resulted in an interpretation that has permeated Western liturgy. One already finds it in Tertullian (*Adv. Marc.* 4.22), who points to Moses and Elijah as, respectively, the representatives of the Law and the Prophets. See J. A. McGuckin, *The Transfiguration of Christ in Scripture and Tradition* (SBEC 9; Lewiston: Mellen, 1986). On the relationship of Moses and Elijah with the Davidic Messiah, see J. F. Elwolde, 'The Biblical Dead Sea Scrolls and Some Issues of Canon', *Canon and Modern Bible Translation in Interconfessional Perspective* (ed. L. J. de Regt; Istanbul: Bible Society in Turkey/United Bible Societies, 2006) 1–41, here 12–13. See also the contribution of M. Reiser, who distinguishes between an historical level and a symbolic level (which already was the interpretation of Origen): 'Die Verklärung Jesu (Mark 9,2–10): historisch und symbolisch betrachtet', *TTZ* 116 (2007) 27–38.

disciples, is part of this identity. God has acted before them after Jesus had announced his choice. However, the disciples will not understand the significance of all this immediately and will need a second revelation. They have stopped at the vision of the transfigured Jesus and at the appearance of Moses and Elijah, unaware of the consequences of the transfiguration that God has granted to Jesus, and do not move beyond the enthusiasm that the vision generates among them in order to see how the revelation will in practice bear on the life of Jesus and on God's design.

4. The Disciples' Reaction and God's Design with Regard to Jesus

4.1. *The Disciples' Reaction*

The disciples react in a way that is at the same time surprising, understandable, and inadequate.⁴⁸ They cannot move beyond the extraordinary vision that has unfolded before their eyes. Peter's intervention comes at a particular point in the episode, between the vision and the audition, the vision of the glorious characters that God allows the disciples to see (Mark 9.2c-4) and the divine voice, which, when it issues from the cloud, resounds for them on the mountain (Mark 9.7). The disciple's intervention does no damage to the unfolding of the theophany and introduces a rather unusual but not improbable element. Moreover, Peter's words are reported in almost exactly the same way in all three synoptic accounts (Mark 9.5 par. Matt 17.4 par. Luke 9.33). From a critical perspective, then, the tradition relating to these words seems rather reliable.⁴⁹

Writers are somewhat reluctant to interpret the words in a positive, or even neutral, way. First of all, it is obvious that Peter's intervention causes a slowing down in the narrative action,⁵⁰ but not a cut. Secondly, the beginning of his intervention is completely positive. The use of the term 'Rabbi' indicates that he recognizes in the one who has been transfigured the master who led the three disciples onto the mountain. The phrase 'it is good that we are here' expresses a kind of anticipation of heavenly blessedness.⁵¹ The three disciples are overwhelmed by

48 The term 'reaction' is widely used by authors. The basis for this use is the verbal form of ἀποκριθεῖς (Mark 9.5a). See, for example, C. Clivaz: 'l'intervention de Pierre est conçue par l'évangéliste (Marc) sur le mode de la *réaction*' (her italics) (quoted by Focant, *Marc*, 339).

49 Perhaps the tradition very solidly maintained them because, as I. H. Marshall says, 'the idea of making three booths is perhaps the most obscure in the whole story' (*The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Exeter: Paternoster, 1978] 386). By contrast, it seems certain that the introduction to the words of Peter (Mark 9.5a) must be attributed to a redactional intervention.

50 Yarbrow Collins, *Mark*, 424.

51 Gnlika, *Markus*, 2.34. The author points out (p. 34 n. 27) that this sentence has a very Greek flavour.

an extraordinary, enrapturing, and unknown happiness, which they would like to be never-ending, eternal, a genuine experience that takes root deep inside those who encounter an unearthly, heavenly, reality.⁵²

Peter, with the others, proposes making three tents, that is to say, three stone shelters, made with the rocks scattered upon the high mountain where the disciples now are and on the majority of Palestinian—and indeed all Mediterranean—mountains. Indeed, if the disciples are aiming for a solid and stable dwelling-place, stone is a much better choice than fragile branches. Whatever the type of material to be used, their ‘project’ has just one goal: to set up on earth what the celestial figures have in heaven. There is a dual purpose in this: these heavenly figures should have on earth a dwelling-place appropriate to their honour; at the same time, the disciples wish the state of happiness they are experiencing due to the glorious vision to continue.⁵³ They want to reproduce on earth the eternal dwelling-places of the saints and the righteous, according to a tradition widespread in Jewish apocalyptic (*1 En.* 39.4–8; 41.2; 71.16; *2 En.* 61.2; *T. Abr.* 20.14) and not completely alien to the NT either (cf. Luke 16.9; John 14.2). This tradition, popular in Jesus’ time, functions as sufficient background to the disciples’ surprising suggestion.

In any case, Peter and the other two disciples do not realize that their suggestion is inappropriate to the transient nature of the vision. The meeting of the three heavenly figures takes place not in heaven, where eternal realities are to be found, but on earth, where the merely ephemeral happens: the vision of Jesus’ glory cannot last indefinitely. They do not realize either that it was the divine will that granted them this vision, which, consequently, remains subject to divine initiative: the disciples are not in control of it and cannot extend it as they please. Finally, the three disciples, and in particular Peter, do not realize the relationship that exists between the status of Jesus as a heavenly figure alongside Moses and Elijah, whom they immediately recognize, and the status of Jesus as a human being destined for suffering and death, a notion they utterly rejected a few days before. With the transfiguration, the disciples seem to have forgotten their disagreement with the words of Jesus when he announced this destiny. It becomes apparent, then, that they need the auditory element, that they have to hear the divine voice. The theophany must be fully accomplished, in order to arrive at the understanding that they still lack.

52 Thus, right away, the reaction of Peter cannot be considered as selfish or evasive.

53 Cf. Marshall, *Luke*, 386: ‘to erect earthly counterparts to the heavenly dwelling places’. Gundry (*Mark: A Commentary on his Apology for the Cross* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993] 460) points out, for his part, that Peter ‘has in mind places of honour’. Cf. also Öhler, ‘Verklärung’, 208–9. The purpose of the disciples’ proposal is, first of all, to honour the heavenly characters and *likewise* to extend the extremely gratifying situation that they experience.

4.2 *God's Design with Regard to Jesus*

Matthew (17.5) and Luke (9.33) both report that Peter cannot continue making his proposal because he is effectively interrupted by a cosmic phenomenon, a cloud (Matthew adds 'shining'). It seems that the vision of the three celestial figures disappears behind the cloud. There is only one voice coming from the cloud and it is heard speaking about Jesus. The vision leads to hearing, and hearing will lead in a sudden and abrupt way to the ending of the theophany (Mark 9.8). After Peter's words, the whole episode draws swiftly to a close. However, who actually entered the cloud—only the three heavenly figures; or they and the three disciples as well? The wording of Mark 9.7 (ἐπισκιάζουσα αὐτοῖς) (par. Matt 17.5 par. Luke 9.34) is ambiguous, and scholars are divided about it.⁵⁴ Luke solves our problem by mentioning that 'they' (the disciples) were afraid 'at the time they entered into the cloud'; obviously, such fear cannot overtake the three heavenly figures.⁵⁵ Appeal to Jewish sources proves indecisive.⁵⁶ The only possibility is, perhaps, to argue from the fact that the divine voice comes from the cloud (ἐγένετο φωνὴ ἐκ τῆς νεφέλης), which might imply that those who hear it are not in it. The closest parallel to the episode of the transfiguration, namely that of the baptism (Mark 1.11: φωνὴ ἐγένετο ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν), is in this regard rather illuminating.⁵⁷ It should, thus, be concluded that the pronoun αὐτοῖς (Mark 9.7) refers only to the three heavenly figures: Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. It is they who belong to the divine world and it is over them that the sign of the divine *shekinah* extends. The three disciples, who hear the voice that comes from the cloud, remain outside the cloud but are privileged witnesses to the heavenly glory.

Attempts have been made to find for the words pronounced by the divine voice a parallel in Scripture that might serve as a background to their interpretation. The words from the cloud are closest to those of Gen (LXX) 22.2, 12, 16, where the expression 'your beloved son' refers to Isaac, the only son of

54 In any case, the cloud remained over those who were inside and it covered them with its shadow—this is the sense of the verb ἐπισκιάζω.

55 Cf. F. Bovon, *L'Évangile selon saint Luc 1–9* [CNT IIIa; Genève: Labor et Fides, 1991] 488; Gundry, *Mark*, 461. But many authors do not follow Luke's solution and think that the only ones to enter the cloud were Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Cf. J. P. Heil, *The Transfiguration of Jesus: Narrative Meaning and Function of Mark 9:2–8, Matt 7:1–8 and Luke 9:28–36* (AnBib 144; Rome: PIB, 2000) 148–9; and also Marshall (*Luke*, 387).

56 Bovon (*Luc*, 488) quotes a text of the Targum Neofiti I to the Pentateuch where one reads: 'j'ai fait demeurer les enfants d'Israël dans les nuées de la gloire de la shekinah, sous l'image des huttes' (trad. Le Déaut, SC 256, pp. 484–6).

57 In the episode of the baptism (Mark 1.11), this sentence indicates that the divine voice comes from the heavens and arrives on the earth, where Jesus is. One can likewise conclude that, in the transfiguration, the voice comes out of the cloud towards the disciples, who are outside and in front of the cloud.

Abraham.⁵⁸ The following expression ‘listen to him’ is often associated with Deut 18.15 (‘it is him to whom you will listen’, in the future) in connection with the eschatological prophetic successor of Moses. These OT parallels constitute the starting-point for a number of different interpretations of the transfiguration. If Ps 2.7 is taken as the point of departure then the transfiguration could be interpreted as a Messianic enthronement ceremony.⁵⁹ A background in Deut 18.15 has been regarded as an argument in favour of the identification of the transfigured Jesus with the eschatological prophet, specifically Elijah, who is *par excellence* the prophet of the end-time (cf. Matt 3.22–24).⁶⁰

However, beyond the actual words used, we notice that the utterance attributed to the divine voice contains two core elements: ‘Son’ and ‘listen to him’. Jesus is called ‘Son’ (a word found in both Ps 2 and Gen 22) following a gesture that constitutes an extraordinary sign of God’s closeness to Jesus, not only of Jesus’ closeness to God. This sign is the transfiguration with radiant light that God, the Father, has granted to Jesus before the eyes of his disciples. But they have simply seen that he is a heavenly figure, like Moses and Elijah. At this point, God, the Father, formally proclaims the status of Jesus with the voice that comes out from the cloud and that, in the presence of the disciples, designates Jesus as ‘the Son’, as the one who has a uniquely close relationship with God, the Father. The divine glory is manifested on the mountain by means of the cloud and the voice, a measured theophany, without ‘a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest’ (Heb 12.18 [NRSV]; cf. Exod 19.16–19). What is especially apparent is, rather, the personal engagement of God with his transfigured Son.⁶¹

The second element at the heart of the divine declaration is a command: ‘listen to him’. The divine command is quite clear: one should not set up stone shelters but should listen to Jesus, a command that, accordingly, refers to the same disciples’ reaction of rejection to Jesus’ announcement about his suffering and death. The command to listen to Jesus takes on a profound dimension when it is set against the failure to listen and the rebuke Peter had addressed to the Master. It is especially to Jesus that one must listen, even before Moses and Elijah. All

58 Note that the same adjective *ἀγαπητός* means ‘unique’ in Gen 22 and ‘beloved’ in the synoptic episodes of the transfiguration and the baptism. In fact, *yahid*, the corresponding Hebrew term, has both connotations.

59 Öhler mentions a list of authors who share this opinion (‘Verklärung’, n. 44).

60 It is necessary to acknowledge that, both during Jesus’ vision in the Jordan as well as during that of the disciples on the high mountain, it is not clear whether the words spoken by the divine voice—recorded in the texts of the Gospels—have their origin in the event itself or whether they should be attributed to a post-paschal elaboration originating in a few biblical texts. However, the core of these words corresponds to the benevolent gesture of the Father, who has decided to transfigure Jesus and has sent Moses and Elijah to join him.

61 Likewise, according to Gnllka (*Markus*, 2.35), the cloud and the voice ‘deuten die Verklärung Jesu und sind die göttliche Antwort auf Petri Reaktion’. It should be added that this response *also* refers to the episode of the reaction of Peter to Jesus’ words about his suffering and death.

three were in conversation at the beginning of the theophany, but it is only Jesus, the divine voice affirms, to whom it is necessary to listen.⁶² The theophany began with three heavenly figures but closes with the mention of just one: Jesus, the only Son. Because of that, he is the only one (or the first one) to whom one must listen.

After an episode of disobedience, where Peter and the other disciples have come out openly against Jesus' words concerning his passion and death, it is very likely that the two episodes should be viewed in combination. This relationship is reflected in the strong, albeit flexible, bond that exists between the imperative 'Get behind me' (Mark 8.33) and another imperative, 'listen to him' (Mark 9.7c), both addressed to the disciples, and especially to Peter. The first is pronounced by Jesus; the second, by the divine voice. The first comes after the disciples' reaction of complete refusal to accept Jesus' announcement concerning his tragic destiny. The second occurs after an inadequate, albeit understandable, reaction of the disciples, in which they propose making three stone shelters for the heavenly figures.

By taking up once more the language of Mark 8.33 on the views of God and of men, we may say that in the episode of the transfiguration God, the Father, in the glorification of the image of his Son and in making that Son's words the main point of reference for the disciples, has revealed his thoughts and his design, his feelings and his emotions. Jesus' announcement of his suffering and death is not just Jesus' choice but is *also* part of God's design.⁶³ As a result, Peter's rebuke to Jesus and his rejection of Jesus' words is something that belongs to the views of human beings, which have nothing to do with those of God. Now that the divine voice has confirmed Jesus as the one to whom they must listen, Peter and the others must re-establish themselves as disciples and position themselves once more to follow Jesus.

5. Conclusions

1. The episode of the transfiguration is unique in the life of Jesus and invites us to ask about the reasons behind it. Our starting point is the choice of Jesus himself. Nowhere is it said that he wanted to be transfigured by God or that the disciples had asked for a sign from heaven, but a sign did appear, associated with the dual choice that Jesus had made: he announced, for himself (not the

⁶² Jesus is the decisive authority even over the revelation that Moses and Elijah had received. Thus, he deserves trustworthiness and obedience. Cf. Ch. Knights, 'Metamorphosis and Obedience: An Interpretation of Mark's Account of the Transfiguration of Jesus', *ET* 121 (2010) 218–22.

⁶³ Focant (*Marc*, 336) points out that Jesus' words during the passion are empowered with a new authority, thanks to the divine voice that has spoken on the mountain, and quotes Mark 8.33.

disciples) a destiny of suffering and death, and then, faced with rejection of his words by the disciples, especially Peter, takes them with him onto a high mountain, so that they can have a spiritually profound experience of encounter with God and understand what 'God's views' are. The point of departure of the transfiguration episode, then, is to be found in the difficulties the disciples have in accepting Jesus' announcement, which appeared to be opposed to his status of Messiah, which Peter, with the others, had just recognized. While it is true that the dominant form of messianism in Israel was related to the Messiah's success and triumph, and that Jesus had spoken about suffering and death, the fundamental issue was whether his announcement really corresponded to the divine will.

2. The answer comes from God himself. The one who had announced a bitter destiny, of apparent defeat, is not vanquished but, rather, receives, from heaven, the highest honours. His disciples will be the privileged witnesses of the transfiguration that is granted to him, that is to say, a change in external appearance: his clothing and, very probably, his face will shine with a dazzling, celestial, whiteness. Accordingly, Jesus appears before the three disciples as a heavenly figure, as underlined by the appearance of the two best-known prophetic characters from the history of Israel, who were taken up to heaven without dying and, apparently, are immediately recognized by the disciples. Moses and Elijah act as the retinue of the Transfigured One—as their position in Christian iconographic representation shows—and start to converse with him, as is fitting for those who share the same celestial condition. God has shown to the disciples what they were unaware of: that the identity of Jesus is, at the deepest level, a heavenly one; and that Jesus, who precedes Moses and Elijah in the vision, precedes them as well in rank and honour.

3. The vision seems to have reached the point of maximum intensity, with Jesus alongside and even in front of Israel's greatest heavenly figures. Peter seems to have understood this: the first of the three stone shelters to be made should be for Jesus. The words of the disciple are comprehensible: a similar sense of blessedness is only to be found in heaven. He thinks that the three illustrious figures should be honoured with three dwelling-places, which will serve to prolong the vision and the joy that it brings: 'it is good that we', that is to say, the three heavenly figures and the three disciples, 'are here'. Jesus, whom Peter calls 'rabbi', has changed his aspect but is still the same person, and for this reason Peter addresses him with confidence. Jesus does not answer: it is God who must do this. Peter's comments do not determine the theophany, but they imply that the consequences of this revelation for Jesus have not yet been understood: it still has to be understood that the Jesus who announced his death also belongs to the divine world and that every choice he makes—especially that of his tragic destiny—falls within God's design. The divine voice must, accordingly, be heard.

4. The vision culminates in an auditory dimension. A full theophany usually finishes with the divine words to those who take part in it as witnesses and so there is a need for such a voice, this time coming from the cloud, as an evident sign of God's presence in the human world. The cloud will cover with its shadow the three heavenly figures (Jesus, Moses, and Elijah) who have been talking among themselves and who were 'before them' (Mark 9.2d), that is, before the disciples. The divine voice issues from within the cloud and is addressed to the disciples, who are outside: Jesus is the one who receives all the affection, support, closeness, and love of the Father. He is the 'Son'—as shown by the parallels with Ps 2.7 and Gen 22.2, 12, 16, and it is to him that they must listen. The final imperative ('listen to him'), pronounced by the divine voice in the presence of Moses and Elijah, is highly significant: the Father proclaims that the voice of Jesus is given authority. The disciples should follow it and follow Jesus along his way towards suffering and death. The other imperative, of Jesus' just reprimand ('get behind me', Mark 8.33), becomes now 'listen to him'. The transfiguration episode points towards the way of suffering and death, but also towards the way of resurrection. The glory of Jesus and the glory of God shine out and merge together on the high mountain.