

# "THE TRANSFIGURATION"

## Chapter 8

### *Studies in the Gospels*

by

R. C. Trench

Matt. xvii. 1-13; Mark ix. 2-13; Luke ix. 28-36.

*(Note: Since many of the footnotes are in Latin and often include considerable Greek, we have either shortened or omitted a number of them.)*

There has been no little debate and difference of opinion on the relation in which the Transfiguration stands to the words of Christ which went immediately before, '*Verily, I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom,*' or '*till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power*' (Mark); or, '*till they see the kingdom of God*' (Luke). The point in debate has been this--namely, how far the Transfiguration is to be itself regarded as a fulfilment of these words; whether that was a coming of the Son of man in his kingdom, a coming of the kingdom of God with power; and, if accepted as such, in what sense it was such a coming. That the coming of which Christ here speaks is not the coming of the Son of man to judge the world, of which a little while before He spoke (Matt. xvi. 27), is evident; for He has said that there are those present who shall live to see it; that it shall fall within the lifetime of some of that generation who are the Lord's immediate hearers. To this coming, then, at the end of the world to judge the world He cannot refer.

But are we therefore compelled to find in the Transfiguration the fulfilment of his statement, that some standing there should not taste of death till they had seen Him coming in his kingdom? There seem to me two most serious objections to our doing so. The first is this. Mighty event as the Transfiguration doubtless was,--and it stands between the Temptation in the wilderness, and the Agony in the garden, as the culminating point in our Lord's ministry upon earth,--unutterably significant for Himself and for the Church of all times, yet for all this the transient glory of it fails to satisfy and exhaust language so vast as this, '*the Son of man coming in his kingdom,*' '*the kingdom of God coming with power.*' Great as is the Transfiguration, it is hardly great enough for such words as these. But, further than this, it seems impossible to think that our Lord can have used such language of an event removed from the moment at which He utters it by no more than the interval of a week. This is excellently put by Bishop Horsley,<sup>1</sup> little acceptance as his own explanation of the difficulty deserves to obtain: 'If the time described as that when the Son of man should be seen coming in his kingdom be understood to have been the time of the Transfiguration, what will be the amount of the solemn asseveration in the text? Nothing more than this--that in the numerous assembly to which our Lord was speaking, composed, perhaps, of persons of all ages, there were some,--the expressions certainly intimate no great number,--but some few of this great multitude there were, who were not to die within a week; for so much was the utmost interval of time between

---

<sup>1</sup> *Sermons*, vol. I. p. 39.

this discourse and the Transfiguration. Our Lord and Master was not accustomed to amuse his followers with any such nugatory predictions. The like argument sets aside another interpretation, in which our Lord's Ascension and the mission of the Holy Ghost are considered as the "coming in his kingdom" intended in the text. Of what importance was it to tell a numerous assembly (for it was not to the disciples in particular, but to the whole multitude, as we learn from St. Mark, that his discourse was addressed)--to what purpose, I say, could it be, to tell them that there were some among them who were destined to live half a year?'

For myself, I can find no satisfactory explanation of this prediction except such a one as shall recognize its fulfilment in that mightiest judgment act of the Son of man, which the world has yet seen, which, so far as we can understand, it will ever see, until his final coming as the Judge of quick and dead. I refer to that tremendous catastrophe, the destruction of Jerusalem,--when, indeed, that old Jewish economy passed away with a great noise; and, extricating itself from that wreck and ruin, there emerged what it is not too much to call a new earth and a new heaven; when the things shaken were removed to the end that Christ's saints might receive a kingdom which could not be moved. This event, when the Lord spake, was some forty years distant, or more. To men then of full age it was not a mere nugatory prediction, that they should live to see this event, at once so terrible and so magnificent, the close of one æon, and commencement of another; divided from them, as it was, by so many years; even as these words of Christ compel us to believe that, if only for one apostle, yet for more than one of the disciples then standing there, it was fulfilled. The passage will thus be brought into instructive relation to other Scriptures, on which it will throw, and from which it will receive, light. For example, what other explanation can that announcement, 'Verily, I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled' (Matt. xxiv. 34), obtain? A consummation of all things, not, indeed, the final and exhaustive one, in some sort only a rehearsal of that, it is here declared should find place before that whole generation in whose hearing the Lord spake, should have died. Again, when speaking concerning John, the Lord says to Peter, 'If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee' (John xxi. 22)? this 'till I come' cannot be interpreted of the final coming; for an 'If I will,' spoken by those lips, is very much more than a mere expression of power, that He could keep John in life if He chose. The words must be accepted as expressing not merely what He could do, but what He intended to do. It is clear, however, that He did not intend this disciple whom He loved, to tarry till his final coming; for, not to say that there would have been something monstrous in a life protracted so, we know the place and date of his death. It follows that his 'till I come' must receive another interpretation, and that can be no other than one which will put that statement into closest connexion with this wherewith we are dealing now. Let me observe, before leaving this subject, that, accepting the judgment on the Jewish Church as a coming of the Lord,<sup>2</sup> all difficulty in respect of such passages as Jam. v. 8. 9 will at once be removed. Yet a little while, St. James reminds them to whom he writes, and the tyrannous oppression which they endure from Jewish adversaries will have for ever passed away; yet a little while, and Christ will have sent his armies, Himself their invisible Captain, and destroyed the city of those murderers, and delivered his own from their tyranny for ever.<sup>3</sup>

---

2 Hammond has more than one able note upholding this interpretation, thus here, and on Matt. xxiv. 3.

3 It must be freely owned that nearly all the early expositors, the Fathers and medieval interpreters, find in the glory of the Transfiguration that which for them satisfies and fulfils the prediction that has just gone before, '*There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.*' At the same time, when their statements are closely examined, it will be found that in almost every instance

But is there then, it may be asked, no real connexion whatever between these words of Christ and the Transfiguration, which in the three synoptic Gospels is brought into such close and significant juxtaposition with it, which by all three is declared to have followed on the seventh day succeeding? A most real connexion. The Transfiguration was a prelude and a pledge of that which should be hereafter. In that Transfiguration it was clearly shewn that He spoke not at random, who spoke of a kingdom which was his; that He had a kingdom to come in; a glory ready at any moment to burst forth, however for the moment it might be covered and concealed from the eyes of men, from the eyes even of those who were in closest communion with Him. The Transfiguration is an earnest in hand of a glory hereafter to be revealed.

But while the relation in which it stands, and on which the Evangelists lay so marked an emphasis, to that memorable prediction of the Lord's, is worthy of our exactest study, it is not less important to observe another connexion in which they are all careful to place it, namely, with the first distinct announcement which the Saviour has made to his disciples, of his rejection, sufferings, and death (Matt. xvi. 21; Mark ix. 31; Luke ix. 22), an announcement which had so greatly startled, surprized, and dejected them. For indeed this connexion supplies us with a very weighty hint for the right understanding of this solemn scene, and of the ends which it was meant to serve, as a confirmation of their faith, and as helping them to confirm the faith of others. How deep and lasting an impression it had made on them we best gather from the fact that more than thirty years after, St. Peter refers to it as an evidence to himself, an evidence therefore to all who received his word, that in declaring to them 'the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,' he had not followed cunningly devised fables (2 Pet. i. 15-19). To them who had just heard of the sufferings of Christ there was here vouchsafed a prophetic glimpse into the glory which should follow, that in the strength of this they might not be troubled nor offended at the prospect of these sufferings now, nor at the sufferings themselves which presently should arrive. Nor may we regard it merely as an act of gracious condescension to their weakness. This would be to rob the Transfiguration of very much of its meaning. For the Lord Himself this prelibation of glory had doubtless its highest significance. It was a mighty strengthening and refreshing of Him, no less than of his disciples, against that coming day of humiliation and agony. He did not merely manifest to others that glory which should one day be his, but became more fully conscious of it Himself, and that He already possessed it; however He might voluntarily defer its full manifestation;--not to say that in this momentary breaking forth of that inward splendour, for the most part hindered and restrained by the sackcloth covering of the flesh, there was a step in the progressive glorifying of that humanity which He had assumed. But it will be better not to anticipate what will find presently its fitter place.

*'After six days Jesus taketh with Him Peter and James and John.'* Not without a meaning is it so carefully noted by all the Evangelists that it was *'after six days'* (Matthew, Mark)--the *'eight days after'*<sup>4</sup> of St. Luke being no contradiction, but only a different way of counting, leaving as it does the six complete days between--that the Transfiguration found place. There are six days of the world's work, which the seventh day's glory, of which we have here a foretaste, is to follow. Three of his disciples the Lord takes with Him, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established (Deut. xix. 15); these three the flower and crown of

---

they have felt themselves obliged to moderate and temper these, so that the Transfiguration shall in fact be rather a prelude and prophecy of the coming in glory than the very coming itself. . . . [footnote shortened].

4 [Omitted.]

the apostolic band, the 'coryphæi,' as Chrysostom calls them, and not now alone favoured above the rest (Matt. xxvi. 37; Luke viii. 51); they are Peter, who loved Him so much (John xxi. 17), and John, whom He loved so much (John xiii. 23), and James, who should first attest that death could as little as life separate from his love (Acts xii. 1); being the same three who should hereafter be witnesses of the deepest depth of his humiliation in the Agony of the garden, and who therefore were thus fitly forearmed by what they now beheld against what they should then behold.

Having taken these, He '*leadeth them up into an high mountain apart by themselves.*' The tradition which makes Mount Tabor to have been this '*high mountain,*' though for many ages not so much as called in question, does not date farther back than the fourth century, Cyril of Jerusalem<sup>5</sup> being the first to mention it. Indeed there is an earlier tradition still, which places the scene of the Transfiguration on the Mount of Olives, and thus in the immediate neighbourhood of Jerusalem,<sup>6</sup> but it is one which seems to have obtained little acceptance. Tabor having been once fixed on (it probably was so, as the highest and goodliest mountain in Galilee, rising in an almost perfect cone from the plain,<sup>7</sup> and, though unnamed in the New, of frequent commemoration in the Old Testament; thus see Judg. iv. 6, 14; viii. 18; Ps. lxxxix. 12; Jer. xlvi. 18), there were built churches, and presently monasteries, on its summit--three of the former to correspond to the three tabernacles which Peter was *not* permitted to build! But while evidence in favour of Tabor there is absolutely none, that against it is strong, is indeed decisive. 'The historical data which we possess, shew that the summit of the mountain was employed without any intermission between the times of Antiochus the Great, 218 B.C., and the destruction of Jerusalem under Vespasian, as a stronghold, and was by no means the scene of peace and solitude whither one would flee, anxious to escape the turmoil of the world. The consecration which quiet and seclusion give was only reached after the fortresses which once crowned its summit had been laid low.'<sup>8</sup> It is impossible therefore that Tabor can have been that 'holy mountain,' to which the Lord retired that He with his three disciples might be there, '*apart by themselves.*' It may perhaps have been Hermon, or one of the spurs of the Antilebanon. But, whatever mountain it was, it certainly is not for nothing that this and so many other of the most memorable events in Holy Scripture are transacted upon mountains; as the offering of Isaac (Gen. xxii. 14), the giving of the old Law (Exod. xix.; Deut. xxxiii. 2), and of the new (Matt. v. 1), the last decisive conflict between Jehovah and Baal (1 Kin. xviii. 19), the apparition of the risen Lord (Matt. xxviii. 16); from 'a very high mountain' the vision of the New Jerusalem is vouchsafed to Ezekiel (xl. 2), and to St. John (Rev. xxi. 10). It was not by accident that in the days of his flesh the Lord was wont to withdraw to a mountain for prayer (Matt. xiv. 23; Luke xxi. 37; John vi. 15), even as, according to St. Luke, it was for prayer that He retired to this the mount of his Transfiguration. Towering above the smoke and stir of this dim and lower earth, advancing their heads into a purer atmosphere and one nearer to heaven, they have in them a sort of natural '*Sursum corda,*' which constitutes them fittest spots

---

5 *Catech.* xii. 16. In the Greek Church the festival of the Transfiguration (Aug. 6) has derived its name, Τὸ Θαβώριον, from this tradition.

6 Ritter gives in proof a reference, *Itin. Anton. Aug. et Hierosolytanum*, ed. Parthey, 1848, which I have had no opportunity of verifying.

7 Λόφος μαστοειδής Polybius (v. 70. 6) calls it.

8 Ritter, *Comparative Geography of Palestine*, English translation, vol. ii. p. 313; compare Robinson, *Bibl. Researches*, vol. iii. pp. 220-225; Herzog, *Encyclopädie*, art. *Thabor*.

for nearer commerce with God, for special communications from Him.<sup>9</sup>

Being there, *'He was transfigured before them.'* St. Luke, writing primarily for Greek readers, avoids this word, *'transfigured,'* or transformed; ('metamorphosed' would be a still closer rendering), which St. Matthew and St. Mark do not shrink from employing. He avoids it, probably, because of the associations of the heathen mythology, which would so easily, and almost inevitably, attach themselves to it in the imagination of a Greek;<sup>10</sup> and is satisfied with telling us *'that the fashion of his countenance was altered,'* adding indeed to this that it was *'as He prayed'* that this marvellous change came over Him (cf. 2 Cor. iii. 18, where the significant *μεταμορφούμεθα* occurs). It was a change not without its weaker analogies, and prophetic anticipations in other personages of Scripture, in Moses for example, when the skin of his face shone after he had come from talking with God upon the mount (Exod. xxxiv. 29-35); which circumstance therefore Hilary rightly calls a figure of the Transfiguration.<sup>11</sup> Another such figure, although that not an anticipation, but a reminiscence of it, the martyrdom of St. Stephen affords, when those who looked at him *'saw his face as it had been the face of an angel'* (Acts vi. 15); and how often at the departure of holy saints and servants of God has some such gleam of the coming glory been observed to light up their countenances even here.

But in the Lord of glory it was not the countenance only, which thus wore a splendour different from the common; in addition to this, *'his raiment was white and glistering;'*<sup>12</sup> or, as St. Mark has it, *'became shining, exceeding white as snow'* (cf. Rev. i. 14), *'so as no fuller on earth can white them.'* It was probably night, when this marvellous spectacle was vouchsafed to the disciples. Such an assumption best explains *'the next day'* of Luke ix. 37. This, if it was so, must have infinitely enhanced the grandeur of the vision; although no doubt before that brightness the brightness even of the noonday sun would have paled (Acts xxvi. 13). Indeed, all words seem weak to the Evangelists, all images to fail them here. St. Mark, whose words I have quoted, borrows one image from the world of nature, another from that of man's art and device; struggling by aid of these to set forth and reproduce for his readers the transcendent brightness of that light which now arrayed, and from head to foot, the person of the Lord, breaking forth from within, and overflowing the very garments which He wore; until in their eyes who beheld, He seemed to clothe Himself with light, which is ever the proper and peculiar investiture of Deity (Ps. civ. 2; Exod. iii. 2, 4), as with a garment. In the circumstance that his glory was not one which was lent Him, but his own, bursting forth as from an inner fountain of light, not merely gilding Him from without; nor playing, like that of Moses, on the skin and surface of his countenance; perhaps also in its being a glory which arrayed not his face alone, but his entire person, we have those tokens of superiority, those prerogatives of the Master above the servants, which we are evermore able to trace even in matters wherein one or another of these may seem to have anticipated, and thus to have come into some sort of

---

9 [Omitted.]

10 Jerome warns against such an abuse of *μετεμορφώθη* here: *Nemo putet pristinam eum formam amisisse; non substantia tollitur, sed gloria commutatur. Anselm: Non formam humani corporis amisit, sed suam suorumque glorificationem præmonstravit.* In naming this great event, the German theology, calling it *'die Verklärung,'* or *'the Glorification'* (it is frequently *'Clarificatio'* in the early Lutheran divines), has seized this point, not exactly the same as our *'Transfiguration.'*

11 *Figura transfigurationis.*

12 [Omitted.]

competition with Him.<sup>13</sup>

I have lightly touched already, and shall have occasion to dwell further on some aspects, in which the Transfiguration may be regarded as designed to strengthen and encourage the hearts first of those who witnessed it, and then of all those to whom their witness should come. But in addition to these it has ever been contemplated in the Church as a prophetic intimation of the glory which the saints shall have in the resurrection.<sup>14</sup> As was the body of Christ, the first fruits of the new creation, on the Mount, so hereafter shall their bodies be. It is difficult not to recognize a direct reference to the Transfiguration in the words of St. Paul, where he speaks of Christ's body of glory to which hereafter the body of our humiliation shall be conformed (Phil. iii. 21); while in passages out of number we have hints of the luminous nature of the future glorified bodies of the redeemed (Dan. xii. 3; Matt. xiii. 43; 1 Cor. xv. 43; Col. iii. 4; 1 Pet. v. 1; Rev. iii. 4, 5; Wisd. iii. 7); all these Scriptures pointing to the glorious conformity of their bodies hereafter, to all which his body at this time was, who now shewed in Himself what hereafter He should shew in all them that were his.

'*And behold*' (wonder within wonder), '*there appeared unto them Moses and Elias, talking with Him.*'<sup>15</sup> The question, *How* the disciples knew these two to be Moses and Elias, is surely an idle one; and the suggestion that they gathered their knowledge from the conversation which they overheard, or that they recognized the horns of Moses, or the ascetic garments of Elias, merely superfluous. That elevation of their whole spiritual life, that ecstatic state of a divine *clairvoyance*, if we may venture to use this word, in which alone they could have seen these sights at all, will have left them in no doubt concerning those whom they now beheld in solemn conclave with their Lord. Their recognition of them we must regard as immediate and intuitive.<sup>16</sup> The same question is sometimes asked about St. Paul, namely, how he could see in a vision a man whose name he should know to be Ananias (Acts ix. 12). It is sufficient to answer that the vision which shewed him the man, imparted to him also the name of the man.

But while this question may thus be dismissed, we cannot so dismiss another, namely, why the two who appear should be exactly Moses and Elias, these, and no other? It was not merely that among all the prophets and saints of the Old Testament they were the two, of whom one had not died (2 Kin. ii. 11; cf. Eccus. xlviii. 9), and the other had no sooner tasted of death than probably his body was withdrawn from under the dominion of death and of him that had the power of death (Deut. xxxiv. 6; Jude 9); the two, therefore, whose apparition in glorified bodies before the day of resurrection had less in it perplexing than that of any others would have had. This was something; but much more that these two were the acknowledged heads

---

13 [Omitted.]

14 [Omitted.]

15 One of the best and soundest of the Mystics, Richard of St. Victor, warning against visions, and urging the necessity of trying all such by the Word of God, of making that the standard by which all subjective revelations should be tried, whether they were indeed of God, or only delusions of the enemy, has some striking admonitions drawn from this presence of Moses and Elias with the Lord in the Mount (*Benjamin Minor*, lxxxi.) Sed si jam te existimas ascendisse ad cor altum, et apprehendisse montem illus excelsum et magnum si jam te credis Christum videre transfiguratum, quidquid in illo videas, quidquid ab illo audias, non ei facile credas, nisi occurrant ei Moyses et Elias. Suspecta est mihi omnis veritas quam non confirmat Scripturum auctoritas, nec Christum in sua clarificatione recipio, si non assistant ei Moyses et Elias. Compare Thauler, *Homiliae*, 1553, p. 540.

16 [Omitted.]

and representatives, the one of the Law, the other of the prophets; in which Law and prophets the whole Old Testament is commonly summed up (Matt. vii. 12).<sup>17</sup>

'*And they were talking with Jesus.*' What the matter of this august conference was St. Luke informs us, namely, that '*they spake of his decease,*<sup>18</sup> *which He should accomplish at Jerusalem;*' of that '*decease*' prefigured by the types of the law (Num. xxi. 9; Exod. xii. 46), fore-announced by the oracles of the prophets (Zech. xii. 10; Isai. liii. 9).<sup>19</sup> '*Decease*' has now become so mere a synonym for death, it has so much lost its proper sense of departure, i.e. out of this life (decessus), that, as we read in the English, we are in danger of missing, indeed we can hardly help missing, an allusion which must at once suggest itself to every reader of the Greek. We fail to mark the relation, which the sacred historian could scarcely not have intended us to recognize, between this '*exodus*' and an earlier; we fail to recognize in this an '*accomplishing*' or fulfilling, as he is careful to note, by the Saviour at Jerusalem of a '*decease,*' departure or '*exodus*' (cf. Heb. xi. 22), which Moses and Joshua had begun in Egypt and in the wilderness, but had *not* accomplished (Heb. iv. 6-9); the '*exodus,*' that is, or going out of God's people, their Captain and Commander leading the way, from this present evil world.

The unity of the Old and New Covenant is wonderfully attested by this apparition of the princes of the Old in solemn yet familiar intercourse with the Lord of the New; and not the unity only, but with this unity the subordination of the Old to the New, that 'Christ is the end of the law' (Rom. x. 4), and the object to which all prophecy pointed (Luke xxiv. 44; Acts x. 43; xxviii. 23; Rom. iii. 21), that therefore the great purpose of these had now been fulfilled; all which was declared in the fact that, after their testimony thus given, Moses and Elias disappear, while Christ only remains. It need hardly be observed what strength there was here, and in the remembrance of this scene, for the disciples, when they should afterwards behold their Lord put to death as a breaker of the law of Moses, as a false snatcher to Himself of the words of the prophets.

'*But Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep; and when they were awake, they saw his glory, and the two men that stood with Him.*' These words are too often misunderstood; indeed, until the translation is corrected, they can hardly fail to be misunderstood. It is usual for commentators to take the disciples to task for this sleep of theirs at such a moment,<sup>20</sup> and to find a parallel to it in the sleep of the same three in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. xxvi. 40-45). The parallel is altogether misleading. That was a somnolence not without its guilt; while they were sleeping that untimely sleep, they should have been watching and praying, seeking strength for themselves and help for their Lord. But the fact that the eyes of the disciples here '*were heavy with sleep,*' this might be, and was, an evidence of human infirmity, of the inability of this weak nature of ours to bear a weight of glory, when it is laid upon it, but

---

17 [Omitted.]

18 Τὴν ἐξοδόν. The word is not without its special solemnity. He who has an εἴσοδος (Acts xiii. 24) into the world, has also an ἐξοδος out of the world. St. Peter employs the same word of his own '*decease,*' 2 Pet. i. 15[footnote shortened].

19 Gerhard (*Harm.* 87): Institutum itaque fuit colloquium de illo ipso articulo, quo apostoli paulo ante offensi fuerant; nimirum de passione et morte Servatoris nostri, Jesu Christi.

20 Thus Gerhard (*Loci Theoll.* xxxii. 2): Discipuli somno erant gravati, per quem denotatur nostra somnolentia, quod gloriam vitæ æternæ non satis æstimamus ac meditamur.

of nothing more than this.<sup>21</sup> The true parallels to the words before us are Gen. xv. 12; Dan. x. 9; Zech. iv. 1; and we may add, as materially helping to illustrate what the condition of the three apostles was, Num. xxiv. 4. Theirs, as has been urged already, was the condition of a divine *clairvoyance*; their eyes heavy with sleep, but they not asleep; for having resisted all the temptations of this frail nature of ours to succumb under the burden of this glory--and what a burden it is to be the immediate recipient of any divine revelation Daniel has often told us (vii. 28; viii. 27; x. 8, 11, 16)--'*having kept themselves awake throughout*' (for this and not '*when they were awake*,' is the right rendering),<sup>22</sup> '*they saw his glory, and the two men that stood with Him.*' The disciples saw this vision, as indeed it only could have been seen, 'in spirit' or 'in a trance' (Acts x. 10; xi. 5; xxii. 17; 1 Cor. xiv. 15; Rev. i. 10); just as the witch of Endor, being within the circle of the supernatural manifestation, saw what Saul, who was outside of it, could not see, and could only learn from her lips (1 Sam. xxviii. 13, 14). Whether they saw that vision in the body or out of the body the disciples could not, any more than St. Paul in a later ecstasy (2 Cor. xii. 3), have told.<sup>23</sup> It is from this point of view, and keeping this in mind, that we must explain St. Luke's comment on Peter's proposal which presently follows--to wit, that the apostle made it, '*not knowing what he said.*' Tertullian long ago gave the right explanation of these words,<sup>24</sup> which many have subsequently missed.<sup>25</sup> They are no apology upon the part of the Evangelist for St. Peter's untimely suggestion, still less a judgment upon it. Inopportune that suggestion may have been, and beside the mark; and, even while testifying for his zeal and for his delight in that heavenly communion, such in some sense it was. This, however, is not what St. Luke is affirming; but that he so spake, being out of and beside himself; not indeed *demens* but *amens*, rapt into another world, a super-natural world of fear and wonder, into conditions altogether remote from those of our common existence; as appears still more plainly in the parallel statement of St. Mark; '*for he wist not what to say, for they were sore afraid.*'

His proposal is this: '*Lord, it is good for us to be here; if Thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles, one for Thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias;*' he made it, as the third Evangelist, again significantly completing the earlier, informs us, '*as they departed from Him;*' or much better, '*as they were divided from Him.*'<sup>26</sup> It is too brief a converse, too transient a glimpse and foretaste of the heavenly glory. He will fain detain these august visitors. Wherefore should all these marvels of the higher world be shewn to them, only to be withdrawn again in an instant? '*It is good for us to be here*'--better, as no doubt he felt, than to be rejected of the Jews, better than to suffer many things of the Elders and Chief Priests and Scribes, and be killed (Matt. xvi. 21). But that holy retirement in which they were was '*good,*' as he esteemed it, not merely as a safe shelter and hiding place from all this evil, but also for the sweetness which he found in the communion and fellowship which it offered. 'But what,'

21 Chrysostom has a right insight into the matter: [footnote shortened].

22 [Omitted.]

23 Compare Philo, *Quis Rer. Div. Hæres*, § 53, who there and elsewhere has much to say on the true character of the Scriptural *ἔκστασις*, which word he found in his Septuagint at Gen. ii. 21; xv. 12.

24 *Adv. Marc.* iv. 22: In spiritu enim homo constitutus, præsertim cum gloriam Dei conspicit, vel cum per ipsum Deus loquitur, necesse est excidat sensu, obumbratus scilicet virtute divinâ . . . Interim facile est amentiam [=ἔκστασιν] Petri probare. Quomodo enim Moysem et Eliam cognovisset nisi in spiritu?

25 Gerhard for example: Hanc vocem ex carnali inscitâ profectum esse Lucas testatur, Non enim noverat quid loqueretur.

26 [Omitted.]



exclaims Anselm in a sermon of extraordinary richness and beauty, from which I have already quoted one or two fragments, 'if the contemplation of Christ's glorified humanity so filled the apostle with joy that he was unwilling to be sundered from it, how shall it fare with them who attain to the contemplation of his glorious Godhead? and if it was so good a thing to dwell with two of his saints, how then to come to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the general assembly and Church of the firstborn that are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to these, not seen through a glass and darkly, but face to face?'

But abiding on that mountain top they will need, as the apostle conceives, some kind of shelter; for so are things earthly confused with things heavenly in his mind. He, ever prompt for action, as ready with the labour of his hands as with the devotion of his heart, aided by the other two, will quickly prepare some slight booths of the branches of trees, or of whatever else may come to hand, in which they may tarry: '*Let us make here three tabernacles, one for Thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias.*'<sup>27</sup> That there is any allusion here to the Feast of Tabernacles, that St. Peter is measuring here the heavenly felicity by that poor earthly copy, I cannot for an instant believe; and altogether it seems to me that he is very needlessly schooled and found fault with by modern commentators, and, indeed, by some ancient interpreters as well, for these words of his. There was a certain fault in them no doubt. He who would suggest this had scarcely maintained himself at the height of that great confession which he had so lately made (Matt. xvi. 16). However honourably he may have meant it for his Master, yet, putting those other two at all on the same level with Him, he plainly declared that he did not yet perceive how far that Master transcended all other, even the princes of the elder dispensation, how far higher a dispensation had begun with Him;<sup>28</sup> he in this revealed his own need of the teaching of that vision and that voice, which was presently to be vouchsafed to him and to his fellows; for we have a right to see in what immediately succeeds the answer from heaven to that word of his:<sup>29</sup> '*while he yet spake, behold a bright cloud overshadowed them,*' not the disciples, but the legislator and the prophet, and perhaps also Him that was Lord alike of them both.

A cloud is the constant symbol, or, if not always this, yet the constant accompaniment or vehicle, of the divine presence (Exod. xiv. 19; xix. 16; xxxiii. 9; xl. 34; 1 Kin. viii. 10; Ps. civ. 3; Isai. xix. 1; Ezek. x. 3; Dan. vii. 13; Rev. xiv. 14). There is a manifest fitness in the symbol. The clouds of our lower world veil, sheath, render tolerable to mortal eyes the splendour of the heavens, the brightness of the sun, which otherwise we could not endure to behold. In the Old Testament, indeed, 'a ministration of condemnation' (2 Cor. iii. 9), the cloud is a dark cloud, a thick cloud (1 King. viii. 12); for God, though in part revealing, is also in part a God that hideth, Himself (Isai. xlv. 15); it is often a cloud charged with thunder and lightning, and all the dreadful artillery of heaven (Exod. xix. 16; Ps. xviii. 12); for there was in that dispensation the utterance of God's displeasure against the sins of men. But the cloud which now over-shadows these is '*a bright cloud,*' agreeable to the character of the dispensation which has now begun; yet, bright as it is, still serving the purpose of veiling the more intolerable brightness within, even that of God's very presence in this the Schechina or place of his

---

27 Ambrose: *Impiger operarius communis obsequii ministerium pollicetur.*

28 Jerome: *Erras, Petre, sicut et alius Evangelista testatur, Nescis quid dicas. Noli tria tabernacula quærere, cum unum sit tabernaculum Evangelii, in quo Lex et Prophetæ recapitulanda sunt. Nequaquam servos cum Domino confera.*

29 [Omitted.]

dwelling; and making possible for mortal and sinful men that which else would have been impossible for them, namely, to stand in that presence and live (Exod. xxxii. 20; Judg. xiii. 22; Isai. vi. 5).<sup>30</sup>

It may seem strange at first that to 'a bright cloud' such a power of overshadowing and concealing should be ascribed; yet it is not really strange; for light in its utmost intensity hides as effectually as the darkness would do. God dwells in light inaccessible, whom therefore 'no man hath seen, nor can see' (1 Tim. vi. 16);<sup>31</sup> and compare the words of Milton, 'dark with excess of light;' and of Wordsworth, 'a glorious privacy of light;' in like manner Philo affirms of the highest light that it is identical with darkness (γνόφος), even as it is the character of extremes evermore to meet. They, that is, the two, were hidden in that blaze of intolerable light from the eyes of the disciples, who 'feared as they entered into the cloud' (Luke ix. 34), feared with that fear which evermore falls on sinful men when brought suddenly into immediate nearness to the pure and awful presences of heaven. They may have feared too that their Lord was now about to be taken from them, to anticipate the day of his Ascension, and to mount already the cloud-chariot which should one day bear Him from their sight (Acts i. 9); for the Transfiguration must have made plain to them as to Himself that He needed not the painful passage of death by which to enter into glory; that if He still laid down his life, it was not of necessity, but of freest love.

And then it must have been fear upon fear, when '*behold a voice out of the cloud,*' the same voice which had once before been heard at the Baptism (Matt. iii. 17), and which should salute Him again as He stood on the threshold of his Passion (John xii. 28); and thus at the beginning, at the middle, and at the close of his ministry, '*This is my beloved<sup>32</sup> Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye Him.*' This voice is said by St. Peter to have come 'from the excellent glory' (2 Pet. i. 17); from Him, that is, who dwelt in the cloud, which was here at once the symbol and the vehicle of the divine presence.<sup>33</sup> In respect of the heavenly salutation itself, the emphasis should not be so much laid on '*This*' as on '*Son*;' for the true parallel to the present salutation of the Son by the Father, with the installation of the Son in the highest place of the kingdom, is to be found at Heb. i. 1, 2: 'God, who at sundry times and divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son.' He is to be heard above all others, because He is not a servant in the house of another, as were Moses and Elias, but a Son in his own (Heb. iii. 5, 6). In the words themselves of this majestic installation there is a remarkable honouring of the Old Testament, and of it in all its parts,

---

30 Ambrose: Ut apostoli Dei loquentis majestatem interpositâ nube ferre possent.

31 Anselm, quoting these words of St. Paul, and then the words of Moses, 'And Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was' (Exod. xx. 21), and bringing both passages into connexion with this present, says profoundly, Illa caligo et ista nubes atque illa lux idem sunt.

32 'Αγαπητός in St. Matthew and St. Mark; but ἐκλελεγμένος (cf. ἐκλεκτός Luke xxiii. 35) is now recognized as the true reading in St. Luke.

33 St. Peter in this same passage, looking back at the privilege vouchsafed to him and to the 'sons of thunder,' speaks of himself and them as 'eye-witnesses of the majesty' (ἐπόπται γεννηθέντες τῆς μεγαλειότητος). 'Επόπτης, a technical word, too weakly rendered 'eye-witness,' though it would not be easy to suggest a more adequate rendering, sets well before us the light in which the apostle regarded his and their relation to the things which they were permitted to behold. The ἐπόπτης is properly one admitted and initiated into secret and holy mysteries, the Eleusinian for example, or any other reserved from the common gaze. Such an initiation he would imply, into the secretest and holiest mysteries of all, had been theirs.

which can scarcely be regarded as accidental; for the three several clauses of that salutation are drawn severally from the Psalms (ii. 7), the Prophets (Isai. xlii. 1), and the Law (Deut. xviii. 15); and, as we shall see, they do together proclaim Him concerning whom they are spoken to be the King, the Priest, and, the Prophet of the New Covenant. St. Peter therefore might very fitly declare that in this voice from heaven 'He received from God the Father honour and glory' (2 Pet. i. 17). And first, '*This is my beloved Son;*' but the King's Son is Himself the King; 'yet have I set my King upon my holy hill of Sion' (Ps. ii. 6). And then, '*in whom I am well pleased;*' holy, therefore, harmless and undefiled, fairer than the children of men (Ps. xlv. 2), the sceptre of whose kingdom is a sceptre of righteousness (Heb. i. 8), for in no other could God take a perfect pleasure; and thus the Priest who could and should offer Himself without spot to God (Heb. ix. 14; 1 John iii. 5). But then, further, He is the One whom all are commanded to obey: '*Hear ye Him;*' therefore henceforth the sole Prophet of his Church; Moses, or the Law, has passed away, for that was but the shadow and outline of good things to come (Col. ii. 17; Heb. viii. 5; x. 1), while in Him is body or substance of good things actually present; Elias, or the prophets, has passed away, for in Him all prophecy is fulfilled (Luke xvi. 16; 1 Cor. xiii. 8). They, belonging as they did to a merely preparatory and provisional dispensation, vanish; but Christ, who is the Head of an everlasting dispensation, after whom we do *not* look for another, remains; and this will explain how it came to pass that '*when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only.*'<sup>34</sup>

But before accompanying the Lord and his three disciples, as they come down from that Mount of Vision to this common workday world of ours, with all its labour and suffering and sin, we may pause for a word or two on a subject common to all the Evangelists, but on which St. Matthew dwells most in detail. All have told us of the fear which overcame the three, even while they felt it most good and blessed to be there. But amazing as had been the sights which they saw, it was not these so much as the voice from heaven, the awfulness of that direct speaking of God with man, which man is so little able to endure (cf. Hab. iii. 2, 16; Exod. xx. 19; Heb. xii. 19), that brought them to the extremity of their fear: '*And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid*'--this fear of theirs uttering itself, as is so constantly its manner (Gen. xvii. 3; Num. xvi. 22; Josh. v. 14; Judg. xiii. 20; 1 Sam. xxviii. 14; 1 Chron. xxi. 16; Ezek. i. 28; iii. 23; ix. 8; xi. 13; xlv. 4; Dan. viii. 17; x. 9; Luke xxiv. 5; Acts ix. 4; Rev. i. 17; xix. 10; xxii. 8), in an attitude suggested by those moral instincts of awe, by that sense of his own utter unfitness to stand face to face with the holiness of God, which any near revelation of that holiness must inevitably awaken in the heart of man.<sup>35</sup> To hide the face is the first impulse and instinct of such a moment (Exod. iii. 6; 1 Kin. xix. 13; Ezra 9x. 6); to fall on the face is the most effectual way of so doing, and at the same time of outwardly expressing the inner conviction that for man there is no standing in his own right before God.

---

34 I have made more than one citation from a long and interesting passage on the Transfiguration in Tertullian (*Adv. Marc.* iv. 22). Marcion, in his assault upon the Old Testament and the old Economy, as having proceeded from another God than the author of the New, had found in this transaction, not Christ preferred to Moses and Elias, but Christ honoured and Moses and Elias dishonoured. Tertullian's reply is admirable throughout. Strange, he says, if this had been intended, that they should appear talking with Him, which is an evidence of familiarity; sharing in the same glory, which is an evidence of favour and acceptance; and he thus concluded: *Itaque etsi facta translatio sit auditionis a Moyse et Heliâ in Christo, sed non ut ab alio Deo, nec ad alium Christum, sed a Creatore in Christum ejus, secundum decessionem Veteris, et successionem Novi Testamenti. Tradidit igitur Pater Filio discipulos novos, ostensis prius cum illo Moyse et Heliâ in claritatis prærogativâ, atque ita dimissis, quasi jam et officio et honore dispunctis.*

35 [Omitted.]

'*And Jesus came and touched them;*' as He, now the Incarnate Word, and once the Angel of the Covenant, had touched Daniel (Dan. viii. 18; ix. 21; x. 10, 18), and Jeremiah (Jer. i. 9), and Ezekiel (Ezek. ii. 2); as by the hand of a ministering Seraph He had touched the lips of Isaiah (Isai. vi. 7); as hereafter, the glorified Son of man, walking among the golden candlesticks, He should, under circumstances not unlike, touch or lay his right hand once more upon one of these same three (Rev. i. 17). And with that touch there goes also the reassuring word, that '*Fear not,*' which even the holiest need so much, when God had shewn them their unholiness, the depths of their corruption, the abundant cause which as sinful men they have to fear, cause so abundant that no other but He can enable them to lay this fear aside (Judg. vi. 23; Dan. x. 12, 19; Matt. xxviii. 5; Luke v. 10).<sup>36</sup>

An important discourse follows, which the Lord held with the three favoured disciples, as they were descending from the Mount, and leaving all its mysterious marvels behind them. And first the charge to silence, the seal which He set upon their lips, not to be removed till after the Resurrection: '*And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision*<sup>37</sup> *to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead.*' The three Evangelists here remarkably complete one another. St. Matthew, thus mentioning the injunction to silence, does not mention how well the disciples obeyed it; while St. Luke, mentioning the *fact* of silence--'*they kept it close, and told no man in those days any of those things which they had seen*' (ix. 36),--does not state that this was in obedience to an express command; only St. Mark, with his own characteristic fulness of detail, records both the express command given by the Lord, and the keeping of it by the disciples (ix. 9, 10). That '*Tell the vision to no man,*' implies that they were forbidden to reveal what they had seen even to the fellow-apostles themselves--a hard precept, yet one which was obeyed by them. At the same time, however strict the silence which they kept, we cannot imagine that even so the vision was only for themselves, and altogether lost upon the others. There must have pierced through the whole demeanour of these three, as they returned to fellowship with the others, evident tokens that they had not been for nothing on that holy mountain. The others, in one way or another, must have felt certain that they had seen sights and heard words which had strengthened and reassured their faith, and must have found in this conviction a strengthening and reassuring of their own.

But out of what motive shall we explain this charge to silence, not to be broken until after the Resurrection (cf. Matt. xvi. 20, 21)? We may, perhaps, best explain it thus: The mystery of Christ's Sonship should not be revealed to the world till it had been attested beyond all doubt; not till He had been 'declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead' (Rom. i. 4), and by that Ascension, which was, so to speak, the necessary complement of his Resurrection. It could only be a matter of dispute, and, resting as it did on his miraculous conception, only too easily of profane discussion, till then. A little more light upon this point might have increased their guilt who rejected and crucified Him, but would have done nothing to bring them to the obedience of faith.

St. Mark does not merely connect, and bind into one, the two statements of his fellow Evangelists; he also adds what they have wholly passed over, namely, the perplexity which this language of their Lord occasioned them: '*They kept that saying with themselves, questioning one*

---

36 [Omitted.]

37 [Omitted.]

*with another what the rising from the dead should mean'* (cf. John xx. 9). Not the rising from the dead, but the death which must have gone before, and which could alone render a rising from the dead necessary or possible, it was this which, running counter to all their prejudices and preconceptions, perplexed them so much (Luke xxiv. 22-24; John xii. 24). Yet on this point they do not venture to ask any explanation; but on something else closely connected with all which they had just beheld. *'And his disciples asked Him, saying, Why then say the Scribes that Elias must first come?'* That momentary glimpse which had been vouchsafed to them of Elias reminded them of the place which he occupied in the economy of salvation (Mal. iv. 5, 6). They had seen him, but only for an instant. That transient glimpse could not satisfy the largeness of prophetic announcements about him. How are they to understand his *disappearance*, that they are returning with their Master alone? How was this to be reconciled with a cardinal point in the Jewish theology, namely, that Elias should go before the Messiah? nay, how was it reconcilable with their Master's claims to be the Messiah at all? Their reference to what the Scribes said on this matter, leads us to gather that these urged, as a capital and decisive objection against his Messiahship, that no Elias went before Him; while yet the prophecies of the Old Testament had solemnly closed with a pledge that Elias, going before, should prepare the way of the Lord. This stumbling-block to their faith the Scribes may have laid in the way of the disciples. Will their Lord graciously remove it out of their path?

The great Interpreter of prophecy gives right to that interpretation of the prophetic word which the Scribes maintained: *'Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things. But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them. Then the disciples understood that He spake unto them of John the Baptist.'* Elias had first come. Whether he had so come in the person of John the Baptist, as that he should not hereafter come in his own, whether the prophecy of Malachi found in him its *exhaustive* fulfilment, and not a partial and initial one only, is a question than which few in modern times have more divided interpreters; but one upon which it is unnecessary here to enter, as not immediately belonging to the matter in hand. Enough, that in John the Baptist that word which cannot be broken had found a fulfilment; whether a further fulfilment awaits it, this still remains to be seen.