

Dorothy A. Lee, *TRANSFIGURATION*

Chap 1: "The Transfiguration in Mark"

<sup>9:2</sup> And after six days, Jesus took Peter, James and John, and bore them up to a high mountain by themselves in private. And he was transfigured before them, <sup>3</sup> and his clothes became glistening, very white, such as no bleacher on earth could whiten them. <sup>4</sup> And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses and they were talking together with Jesus. <sup>5</sup> Then Peter said to Jesus in response, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; so let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' <sup>6</sup> For he did not know how to respond, as they were terrified. <sup>7</sup> Then a cloud came overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud: 'This is my beloved Son; listen to him.' <sup>8</sup> And suddenly looking around they no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them. <sup>9</sup> And as they were descending the mountain, he instructed them to relate what they had seen to no-one, until the Son of Man should rise from the dead. (Mk 9:1-9)

Mark tells the story of the transfiguration in simple yet dramatic language. The three phases—ascension, revelation, descent—make use of apocalyptic symbols of light and radiant garments, by which Mark depicts the unfolding drama of God's future, breaking into the grim realities of the present. In this dazzling hope, Jesus' identity as the divine Son is the keystone. In his intimate relationship to God, Jesus is the bearer of the reign (or kingdom) of God, the one through whom God generates that glorious future. The transfiguration story, therefore, speaks as much about Jesus in the present as it does about God's glory in the future; it is as much an epiphany, in the biblical sense, as an apocalyptic drama. The context in which Mark tells his tale makes it clear, moreover, that the glory—which is both an apocalyptic vision and an epiphany—is tied inextricably to suffering and the way of the cross. The poetry of the transfiguration addresses directly the sullen rhetoric of the cross, the beauty of the one turning to embrace the ugliness and squalor of the other.

The transfiguration forms part of Mark's portrayal of the journey to Jerusalem (Mk 8:22-10:52). This journey is structured around three evenly distributed predictions of Jesus' forthcoming passion, death and resurrection. The predictions increase in intensity, the third being the most detailed and comprehensive (8:31; 9:31-32; 10:32-34). They form the backbone to Jesus' teaching in this section of the Gospel, while the journey itself is symbolic, concerned to reveal Jesus' identity and his destiny in Jerusalem, as well as what it means to follow Jesus as a disciple. Mark sees discipleship as flowing from Christology—that is, from his understanding of Jesus—so that the revealing of Jesus' identity is bound up with the calling of disciples.<sup>1</sup> Following each prediction along the way to Jerusalem, Mark exposes the misunderstanding of the disciples (8:32-33; 9:33-37; 10:35-45), a misunderstanding that will climax in their betrayal, flight and denial in the passion narrative. The journey is framed by two stories of blind men receiving their sight, one at the beginning and one at the end (8:22-26; 10:46-52).

Standing at the commencement of the journey to Jerusalem, the transfiguration story thus occupies a strategic position in Mark's Gospel. Indeed, it is part of a diptych that stands at the heart of the Markan narrative, two central panels at the mid-point of the Gospel (8:27-9:13).<sup>2</sup> In the first panel (8:31-38), Jesus at Caesarea Philippi predicts his death and resurrection, unfolding his identity as the suffering, dying, rising and returning Son of Man to his astounded disciples. He speaks of the way of the cross as implying a life of renunciation, self-

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<sup>1</sup> For F.J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), p. 178, the transfiguration has a double message: Jesus' relationship with God and the fragility of the disciples.

<sup>2</sup> C.H.T. Fletcher-Louis, "The Revelation of the Sacral Son of Man: The Genre, History of Religions Context and the Meaning of the Transfiguration," in *Auferstehung—Resurrection*, ed. F. Avemarie and H. Lichtenberger (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 2001) pp. 254-56.

denial, and voluntary powerlessness. In the second panel, where Jesus is transfigured on the mountain before his frightened and uncomprehending disciples, his identity is again revealed, in different though complementary terms. On either side of the two central scenes, Jesus and his disciples discuss his identity in relation to John the Baptist and Elijah. In the second of these the first passion and resurrection prediction at 8:31 is confirmed.

In the centre of the sequence, between the two panels, is a transitional saying introduced by ‘I tell you solemnly’ (9:1). This rather puzzling saying leads from one panel to the other, bringing the first scene to a climax and setting the second scene in motion.<sup>3</sup> The promise of the Son of Man’s future glorious return, says Jesus, will even now be fulfilled in the lifetime of some of those present. While this probably refers to the promise of the risen Christ’s presence with his disciples, its more immediate meaning must be the transfiguration. What the revelation at the centre of Mark’s Gospel is about is the reign of God (*basileia*, 1:15; 1:10; 14:62), a coming that is dependent on Jesus’ identity and divinely-given destiny. The revelation is directed at those disciples who will ‘see’ in their life-time God’s future reign, breaking into the present with transforming power. Note that at the empty tomb the young man in white will tell the disciples that it is in Galilee they will ‘see him’ (16:7). The symbolism of seeing is thus important for Mark, especially on a journey bounded by two blind men who receive sight, in contrast to the disciples who fail to see.<sup>4</sup> To see means more than the visual sight of Jesus: it is a discerning sight that arises from faith.

The theme of the Markan diptych is primarily Jesus’ identity which is both manifest and secret at the same time. Throughout there is a procession of voices that addresses the question of Jesus’ identity, each moving closer to the innermost circle: other people (8:27), the disciples (‘you’, 8:29), Jesus himself (‘the Son of Man’, 8:31, 39), and finally the voice of God from the cloud (9:7).<sup>5</sup> At the same time, linked to the question of identity is the motif of faith and discipleship flowing from Mark’s understanding of Jesus. The whole unit may be illustrated as follows:

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>PANEL 1: SUFFERING (villages of C.P.)</i>	<i>=&gt;Transition</i>	<i>PANEL 2: GLORY (mountain)</i>	<i>Conclusion</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secrecy of revelation</li> <li>• Rôle of Elijah and John the Baptist.</li> <li>• Disciples’ lack of understanding (8:27-30)</li> </ul>	Revelation of Jesus to disciples as suffering Son of Man, who will rise from dead & return in glory (8:31-38)	Seeing God’s reign come in power (9:1)	Revelation of Jesus to three disciples as beloved Son, transfigured in radiance & light (9:2-9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secrecy of revelation</li> <li>• Rôle of Elijah and John the Baptist</li> <li>• Disciples’ lack of understanding (9:10-13)</li> </ul>

Because modern biblical scholars tend to play down the transfiguration, they often underestimate the importance of the second scene, highlighting instead the first with its message of suffering—the way of the cross that commences at the height of Jesus’ Galilæan ministry. As a result, the transfiguration becomes little more than a footnote in the revelation of the cross. Mark is venerated as the martyrs’ Gospel, the Gospel of the

<sup>3</sup> The saying at 9:1, though difficult, makes sense as a bridge statement; A.D.A. Moses, *Matthew’s Transfiguration Story and Jewish-Christian Controversy*, ed. S.E. Porter (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) p. 95, and M. Öhler, "Die Verklärung (Mk 9:1-8): Die Ankunft Der Herrschaft Gottes Auf Der Erde," *Novum Testamentum* 38 (1996) p. 198.

<sup>4</sup> M.D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: A. & C. Black, 1991) pp. 251-53.

<sup>5</sup> F.R. McCurley, "'And after Six Days' (Mark 9:2): A Semitic Literary Device," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974) pp. 77-78.

suffering Son of Man, with its sympathetic portrayal of Jesus' human struggle to carry out the dark, divine will. Suffering is certainly integral to Mark's theological message, and the divine voice at the transfiguration does instruct the disciples to listen to Jesus as he teaches, and walks, the sorrowful path. But the necessity of Jesus' suffering cannot be isolated from the revelation on the mountain. The two panels—passion prediction on the road to Caesarea Philippi and Jesus as the Son on the mountain—belong together, each incomplete without the other. Suffering *and* glory stand together at the heart of Mark's Gospel. Indeed, both dimensions are in one sense present in each of the two scenes. Resurrection, future coming and glory are explicitly referred to in the first scene (8:31, 38), while suffering is implied by the command to listen to Jesus in the second (9:7). In either event, both themes challenge the disciples' expectations of the coming Messiah. Both direct the disciples to God's reign, as it unfolds on the road and on the mountain.

The transfiguration story itself has a simple structure, framed by Jesus' ascent and descent of the mountain in company with his three disciples; in the middle is the transfiguration itself and its attendants heavenly signs, with Peter's response as the centre.

<b>a</b> <i>Setting:</i> Jesus ascends mountain with three disciples (9:2a)		
	<b>b</b> <i>Revelation of Heavenly Signs:</i> • Jesus transfigured • Moses & Elijah (9:2b-4)	
		<b>c</b> <i>Disciples' Response:</i> Peter, tents, confusion, fear (9:5-6)
	<b>b<sup>1</sup></b> <i>Revelation &amp; Interpretation of Signs:</i> • the cloud • the voice (9:7)	
<b>a<sup>1</sup></b> <i>Conclusion:</i> Jesus descends mountain with disciples (9:8-9)		

This structure, technically called a 'chiasm'—for its *a b b a* pattern—makes plain the important rôle played by the disciples as witnesses to the transfiguration. They are present in the frame (*a* and *a<sup>1</sup>*) and at the centre of the story (*c*). Yet, as we shall see, the revelation of Jesus and its heavenly interpretation form the narrative backbone (*b* and *b<sup>1</sup>*), to which the disciples respond. Their rôle is to testify to the transfiguration after the resurrection when the revelation in Jesus will be complete (9:9). Peter's response enacts the misunderstanding of the disciples as a whole, though it is not without insight.

Mark's transfiguration story begins with an unusual time reference: 'six days later' (9:2a). This is strange given that Mark is not usually specific about time outside the passion story. It is possible that the six days has a symbolic function. It could be a time-marker, for example, that sees the seventh day as the day of climax following the revelation at Caesarea Philippi.<sup>6</sup> Or there may be a parallel with Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod 24).<sup>7</sup> There the cloud settles on the mountain for six days before Moses ascends to receive the two tablets of the law

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pp. 67-81. Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, 12.36, in J.A. McGuckin, *The Transfiguration of Christ in Scripture and Tradition* (Lewiston/Queenston: Edwin Mellen, 1986) pp. 155-56, relates this to the six days of creation.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., M.D. Hooker, "What Doest Thou Here, Elijah?": A Look at St. Mark's Account of the Transfiguration," in *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament*, ed. L.D. Hurst and N.T. Wright (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) pp. 59-60.

(Exod 24:16), written ‘with the finger of God (Exod 31:18). The Sinai parallel is not an exact fit but an allusion that does not cancel out other possibilities. What is patent is the connection between the transfiguration and the saying at 9:1.

This is not the only occasion in Mark’s Gospel where the three disciples are singled out by Jesus. Peter, James and John are among the first four to be called by Jesus (1:16-20). All three, along with Andrew, are present at the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (1:29-31). They participate in Jesus’ lifestyle and ministry, coming under fire from the religious authorities (2:16, 23-24; 7:1-16). They are among the twelve appointed to ‘be with him’, sent out to proclaim and cast out demons (3:14-15). Their names appear at the head of the list and they are the only ones to be given nicknames: ‘Peter’ meaning ‘rock’ (though, since it is Greek, Mark does not explain it) and ‘Boanerges’ meaning ‘sons of thunder’ (3:16-17). Belonging to the circle of Jesus’ new family, they are given the key to the mystery of God’s reign (4:11, 34). Along with the other disciples, they witness Jesus’ mighty acts and are awestruck by the one whom ‘even the winds and sea obey’ (4:41). The same three witness Jairus’ twelve-year-old daughter rise from the dead (5:40-42). They are among those sent out on the mission (6:7-13), returning with a sense of achievement (6:30). Yet already the twelve show signs of failing to grasp the mystery of God’s reign, for all their willingness to follow. After the dual feeding episodes, Jesus exposes their hardness of heart (8:14-21). It is not surprising that, as this mystery deepens with the revelation of Jesus’ suffering and glory, the disciples’ incomprehension likewise deepens. Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi receives, not commendation (as in Matthew’s Gospel) but a stern command to secrecy, and Peter’s subsequent reaction to the first passion and resurrection prediction confirms the limited nature of his understanding (8:29-33).<sup>8</sup>

Here for the second, though not last, time in the Gospel, Jesus takes the three disciples aside—privileged, self-sacrificing yet also stubborn and uncomprehending—leading them up the high mountain for the second stage of his self-revelation (see 13:1-37; 14:32-42). Already Jesus has alluded at 9:1 to the fact that some of those present will not die until ‘the reign of God has come in power.’ For the evangelist, at this moment, Peter, James and John represent those ‘standing here’ who will gain a vision of God’s transforming reign. Indeed, everything in the story points intentionally to the disciples: Jesus ‘bears *them* up’ (literally) to the mountain, he is transfigured *before them* (9:2), Elijah and Moses appear *to them* (9:4), Peter’s suggestion is described as his *response* to these events (9:5), the voice coming *out of* the cloud addresses the disciples, and as they descend the mountain Jesus enjoins secrecy (9:9), a secrecy they are to unveil at the proper time.<sup>9</sup> Mark tells the story from the vantage-point of the disciples.

Other symbols of the transfiguration have a similar wealth of meaning. One of the richest is that of the mountain. In ancient cosmology, a high mountain stands on the boundary between heaven and earth. In the Græco-Roman pantheon, for example, people thought that the gods dwelt on the heights of Mount Olympus under the command of Zeus/Jupiter, king of gods and mortals. Judaism too shared a somewhat similar cosmology, though not in so literal a way. The Old Testament identifies several mountains as the ‘mountain of God’ and associates them with revelation,<sup>10</sup> the most famous being Mount Sinai which Moses ascends to receive the gift of the law, entering into the glorious presence of God. Prior to that, the revelation of the divine name and God’s commissioning of Moses at the burning bush occur on Mount Horeb (Exod 3).<sup>11</sup> Like Moses, Elijah too

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<sup>8</sup> Note Mark’s use of the strong verb ‘to rebuke’ (*epitiman*) at 8:30, 32, 33.

<sup>9</sup> On the transfiguration and the secrecy theme in Mark, see J.M. Perry, *Exploring the Transfiguration Story* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1993) pp. 17-28.

<sup>10</sup> For Old Testament associations of the mountain, see T.L. Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain. A Study in Matthean Theology* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985) pp. 30-50, 82-83.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Sinai’ and ‘Horeb’ mean the one mount of revelation in the wilderness; U. Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness. The Wilderness Theme in the Second Gospel and Its Basis in the Biblical Tradition* (London: SCM, 1963) p. 117.

experiences a vision of God on Mount Horeb: not in the noisy wind or earthquake or fire but paradoxically in a 'sound of sheer silence' (1 Kgs 19:11-13).

Mount Zion is also important symbolically, even though it is a different location to Horeb/Sinai. The symbolism, however, coheres. The holy city of Jerusalem, on the top of the mountain, is the city of God, the habitation God loves above any other (Ps 87:1-2). The temple especially is the place where God's glory dwells (e.g. Ps 25:8; Wisd 9:8), where God is to be seen in awesome holiness and beauty (Isa 6:1-4). In other places, the mountain of God—associated with Zion—is eschatological: it depicts the glory of the last days when righteousness and peace will flourish, symbolised in the final banquet (see Isa 11:6-9; 25:6-10a). From the sanctuary of the temple, streams of living water will flow for growth and healing (Ezek 47:1-12) The mountain of God in the Old Testament is thus a numinous place where the air, in more senses than one, is thin: revelation, the law, epiphany, divine indwelling, the end time.

Mark gives no indication of the actual mountain on which the transfiguration takes place. Origen (185-254 AD) and Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315-386 AD) identified the site as Mount Tabor, a tradition that persists today. Tabor is not impossible as a location, although it is not strictly a high mountain (1,350 ft), lies some distance from Caesarea Philippi (south of Capernaum), and in the first century AD had a Roman fortification on its summit. Other possibilities include Mount Hermon, which is much higher (9,200 ft) and just north of Caesarea Philippi—being the source of the Jordan—and also Mount Meron (3,926 ft) in Upper Galilee. Nevertheless, the actual venue is unimportant for Mark. What matters is that Jesus stands, as Moses and Elijah before him, on the mountain of God, at the boundary between heaven and earth, 'on the outskirts of heaven'.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the baptism, which has strong parallels with the transfiguration, nothing is said of the heavens opening, since 'the mountain-top setting obviates a sky-opening'.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Jesus himself represents the bridge between heaven and earth, as the divine voice testifies (9:7; also at the baptism, 1:10-11). In one sense, therefore, we can speak of the mountain as a symbol of Jesus himself, the geography—as elsewhere in this Gospel—serving as a symbol for Mark's Christology.

The most spectacular symbol of the transfiguration is the change in Jesus' clothing which becomes radiantly white, beyond anything in the natural realm (9:2b-3). The transformation (*metemorphôthê*) is miraculous, unearthly, 'such as no bleacher on earth could whiten them.'<sup>14</sup> Mark is not speaking literally of white but rather the 'colour' of light, a light that transcends the natural world. It is a divine hue, showing Jesus' true identity, an identity hidden from human eyes thus far in the Gospel—though implied in everything Jesus says and does—but now triumphantly released to the disciples on the mountain. This is the same numinous clothing from which healing power has come earlier in the Gospel (5:27-32; 6:56),<sup>15</sup> the clothing over which the soldiers will cast lots at the crucifixion (15:20, 24).

White clothing is particularly characteristic of heavenly beings in the apocalyptic writings of Judaism and early Christianity. Apocalyptic theology is concerned with eschatology, the advent of God's future reign on earth. In this literature, God's appearance is associated with whiteness, light and fire, all three elements closely linked. In the vision of Daniel that Mark quotes elsewhere in his Gospel, the Ancient One is garbed in garments 'white as snow', a stream of fire issuing from his presence (13:26; Dan 7:9; 1 Enoch 14:20). Similarly, the angelic beings who stand in the presence of God are clothed in radiant white garments (16:5; 2 Macc 11:8). By extension, the righteous in heaven will also be clothed in white, wearing celestial garb as befits their status and

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<sup>12</sup> M.E. Thrall, "Elijah and Moses in Mark's Account of the Transfiguration," *NTS* 16 (1969-70) p. 312.

<sup>13</sup> T.E. Schmidt, "The Penetration of Barriers and the Revelation of Christ in the Gospels," *Novum Testamentum* 34 (1992) p. 236.

<sup>14</sup> Some manuscripts add the words 'as snow' but this is unlikely to be original.

<sup>15</sup> J.P. Heil, *The Transfiguration of Jesus: Narrative Meaning and Function of Mark 9:2-8, Matt 17:1-8 and Luke 9:28-36* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2000) p. 156.

abode (e.g. 1 Enoch 62:15; 2 Enoch 22:8-10; 4 Ezra 2:39; Apoc 3:5; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14; 19:14). Yet it is strange, given these associations, that only Jesus' clothing is described as white and radiant. Mark does not extend the same description to Moses and Elijah; indeed nothing is said of their raiment or demeanour. The portrayal of Jesus's radiance suggests that his identity, like his physical appearance, is unique.

Mark makes no explicit mention of Jesus' face being changed, unlike Matthew and Luke (Matt 17:2; Lk 9:29). Yet Mark's actual wording is ambiguous. He describes the change in Jesus' appearance in two statements: Jesus was transfigured *and* his clothes becoming dazzlingly white. This could mean that the whiteness of his clothing was the medium of the transfiguration, the word 'and' being explanatory: 'he was transfigured before them in that his clothes became white'. Alternatively, it could be an inclusive statement: 'he was transfigured before them, including his clothes'. In this case, the change in Jesus' clothing—which 'only confirms the unearthly character of his appearance'<sup>16</sup>—would extend to his whole physical *form*.<sup>17</sup> If so, the reference to the transfigured clothing in Mark is a form of metonymy, a figure of speech where the part stands for the whole. It is possible, therefore, that even for Mark Jesus' entire body is metamorphosed: 'Jesus is transfigured, not merely His clothes.'<sup>18</sup>

Mark implies that Jesus' transfiguration is the revelation of his glory (*doxa*), although the actual word does not appear in the story itself. Yet the previous scene has already spoken of the Son of Man's future return in glory (8:38), a glory that the transfiguration seems to anticipate. Mark is again drawing on apocalyptic traditions—which display the hope of God's future triumph—as well as employing symbolism associated with Zion in the Old Testament. The two traditions flow together: glory refers back to the indwelling of God on Mount Zion in the temple, on the one hand, and forwards to the final fulfilment of God's reign, on the other. Jesus' whole being on the mountain is suffused with the saving presence of God;<sup>19</sup> surrounded by the glory of the *Shekinah*, the divine presence redolent with indwelling light.<sup>20</sup>

But does the light and glory of the transfiguration come from within Jesus himself, as the expression of his hidden self, or is it the gift of God coming from without? The divine voice speaking out of the cloud suggests the latter: that it comes from beyond Jesus and depicts 'Jesus' entrance into the *Shekinah*, ... Jesus' unique envelopment in the heart of God'.<sup>21</sup> Yet the light shines only from Jesus himself, and from no other, intimating that the metamorphosis is also, paradoxically, the outward manifesting of Jesus' identity, an identity that is nonetheless dependent upon God. In either case, the light that Jesus displays illuminates his whole being, extending even to his clothing, and will be vindicated at his final coming, his parousia.<sup>22</sup> The symbolism indicates that Jesus belongs not just in the earthly world but also the heavenly; not just in the present but also God's future. The glory has its source in God but it is also a glory that Jesus himself possesses from his first appearance in Mark's Gospel (1:9-11)—a glory given not borrowed, interiorised, forming a unique selfhood that, while bestowed by God, belongs also to Jesus. His radiance is at once the dramatic symbol of his inimitable relationship to the heavenly realm—his unique favour with God—and his own interiority and self-awareness.

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<sup>16</sup> D.H. Juel, *Mark* (Augsburg: Minneapolis, 1990) p. 127.

<sup>17</sup> 'Transfiguration' is from the Latin *transfiguratus est*; the Greek *metamorphosis* means a change in bodily form; J.E. Fossum, "Ascensio, Metamorphosis: The 'Transfiguration' of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels," in *The Image of the Invisible God: Essays on the Influence of Jewish Mysticism on Early Christology*, N.T.O.A. 30 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995) p. 82, regards the translation 'was transfigured' as unfortunate.

<sup>18</sup> J.A. Ziesler, "The Transfiguration Story and the Markan Soteriology," *Expository Times* 81 (1970) p. 266. So G.H. Boobyer, *St. Mark and the Transfiguration Story* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1942) pp. 65-66.

<sup>19</sup> The verb 'transfigured' is a 'divine passive', to avoid the divine name; Heil, pp. 77, 155-56.

<sup>20</sup> *Shekinah* is used in later Judaism for the visible yet mysterious manifestation of God's glory.

<sup>21</sup> McGuckin, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> Boobyer, pp. 48-87, argues that all the transfiguration details point to the parousia.

In a similar way, the symbolism of Moses and Elijah as Jesus' celestial companions indicates something of Jesus' identity (9:4). The reversed chronological placement in which Mark introduces them at first seems strange: 'Elijah with Moses'. The clue to the word order is probably found once again in the realm of apocalyptic symbolism. There were expectations in Judaism that Elijah would appear at the end time as the messenger of God's reign. Malachi speaks of Elijah as the eschatological prophet who will come 'before the great and terrible day of the Lord' (Mal 4:5). At the beginning of Mark's Gospel, a verse from Malachi precedes the quote from Isaiah which introduces John the Baptist, setting the prophecy in the light of God's future: 'Behold I send my messenger before your face' (1:2-3). Similarly at the transfiguration the priority of Elijah ensures an eschatological orientation to the Markan narrative—we now know that Mark here is concerned with God's final advent.<sup>23</sup> Mark makes a good deal of Elijah and sees John the Baptist, in one sense, as the fulfilment of Malachi's promise; Mark's Jesus likewise shares the fate of Elijah/John the Baptist who are subjected to persecution and rejection. So too at the transfiguration, the prominence given to Elijah coheres with Mark's theological concerns. Because Mark sees Elijah as an end-time figure, and because Elijah has influenced his portrayal of both John the Baptist and Jesus, Elijah's name precedes Moses as the more important figure in this context.

The traditional reading that Moses and Elijah represent the law and the prophets has its problems. In the Old Testament, Moses is not just the giver of the law but also the greatest of the prophets. Judaism had expectations of a 'prophet-like-Moses' who would arise to speak the word of the Lord in a way that the people of God would hear (Deut 18:15-18). In a parallel way, the prophet Elijah (whose name is associated with no actual prophetic writings) is a champion of the law over against idolatry. In fact, Elijah himself does not die but is assumed into heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Kgs 2:1-12). The Book of Deuteronomy makes reference to Moses' death and burial (Deut 34:5-6), but the circumstances are mysterious and the site of the grave unknown. The mystery surrounding his burial gave rise to speculation, in some Jewish circles, that Moses too, like Elijah and Enoch (Gen 5:21-24), had perhaps never actually 'tasted death',<sup>24</sup> but been assumed into heaven.<sup>25</sup> Both Moses and Elijah are thus major prophets of Israel's past, associated in some way with bypassing death. Both receive epiphanies on Horeb/Sinai that shape the future of Israel (Exod 3; 24; 34; 1 Kgs 19:1-11). Both in different ways, even in their frailties, exemplify fidelity and obedience to God.

There is also a mystical dimension to the presence of Elijah and Moses. They represent what Christians later came to call the 'communion of saints'—the heavenly world with which Jesus is in communion. In this sense their significance is more subjective: they inhabit not only the celestial realm but also Jesus' own spiritual world.<sup>26</sup> Their external manifestation mirrors their internal presence within Jesus himself, indicating their importance for his spirituality. Although Mark (unlike Luke) says nothing of the subject of conversation between the three exalted figures on the mountain, the very fact that they are portrayed as 'speaking together' emphasises their union and communion. While the transfiguration is narrated from the viewpoint and for the sake of the disciples, it would be a mistake to lose sight of what Jesus himself experiences. His transfiguration is bound up in his awareness of these two giants of Old Testament history and spirituality—prophets who knew God intimately and who shaped the destiny of Israel with their faith and insight.

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<sup>23</sup> J. Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1992) pp. 83-84.

<sup>24</sup> For the link between 9:1 and Moses and Elijah, see B.D. Chilton, "The Transfiguration: Dominical Assurance and Apostolic Vision," *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981) p. 123, and McGuckin, pp. 69-70.

<sup>25</sup> Philo, *Questions on Genesis* 1.86. In some Jewish traditions (e.g. the second century BC Ezekiel the Tragedian), Moses' ascent is his enthronement as king and prophet; Marcus, pp. 84-87.

<sup>26</sup> M. Ramsay, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, 2 ed. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967) pp. 114-15.

Moses and Elijah are thus complex symbols, representing God's ancient people, Israel, and associated with mountain epiphanies and the events of the end-time. One thing is clear in the range of possible meanings. For Mark, the symbolic significance is unmistakably christological: their presence acts as a dual pointer to the identity of Jesus himself. It is no coincidence that they appear at the very moment of Jesus' metamorphosis, opening up past, present and future to the heavenly world, and giving a cosmic perspective on the human world embodied in Israel. As his celestial attendants,<sup>27</sup> Moses and Elijah point symbolically to Jesus, standing 'in the role of Jesus' sponsors'.<sup>28</sup> They remain long enough to present him as the fulfilment of all they stand for in Israel's past and election by God. Like the unearthly white of Jesus' garments, Moses and Elijah, even while not partaking of his brightness, disclose Jesus' heavenly identity, an identity superior to them in every way. With both continuity and vivid contrast, therefore, God 'brought forth the leading prophets so that [the disciples] could see how great a difference there was between slaves and the Master'.<sup>29</sup>

Standing at the centre of the narrative is Peter's response to the symbols of transfiguration (9:5-6). Mark illustrates Peter's enthusiasm but also his woeful lack of comprehension. Indeed, the suggestion that three tents be constructed to house Jesus and his guests is surprisingly difficult to make sense of and Mark has to explain in an editorial aside that Peter's request shows his (and the other disciples') misunderstanding as a result of fear (9:6). Whatever Peter actually intends by his spontaneous outburst, either Mark himself can make no sense of it or Peter's associations are comprehensible, albeit incorrect. Both options would explain Mark's editorial comment. If Peter has a specific meaning and is not just babbling incoherently from fear,<sup>30</sup> we should be able to pin down his assumptions.<sup>31</sup> There are three possible meanings. The first is that the transfiguration recalls to Peter's mind the Jewish feast of Tabernacles. Originally a harvest festival, Tabernacles required that worshippers live for the duration in tents or huts, constructed from leaves and branches, as a reminder of their wandering in the wilderness. Later the feast acquired eschatological significance, looking joyfully to God's redemption at the end-time (Lev 23:33-36; Deut 16:13-15).<sup>32</sup> If this background fits the Markan context, then Peter's mistake would be his assumption that the last days have already come. Yet the problem with this view is why Peter would not propose the construction of *six* tents rather than three. Surely the disciples would see themselves as participants in such an event, just as they would expect to participate in the festivities of Tabernacles?

The second possibility is that Peter is reminded of the tent of meeting in the wilderness, where long ago God spoke to Moses outside the camp of the Israelites (Exod 33:7-11; Deut 31:14-15). This interpretation would mean that, in Peter's eyes, the transfiguration—and especially the communion between Jesus, Moses and Elijah—signifies the re-opening of an ancient channel of communication, a channel requiring an earthly edifice. Yet why, in that case, would Peter propose three tents instead of one? During the wilderness period, there was only ever one tent for Moses to commune with God. Peter would hardly suggest the erecting of three tents where only one is required by the Old Testament symbolism.

The third possibility has its source in more overtly apocalyptic texts which, as we have already seen, have had a powerful influence on Mark's theology. Peter may well be thinking of the eternal tents in which the righteous will dwell with the angels at the end-time (1 Enoch 39:3-8; Testament of Abraham A 20:13-14).<sup>33</sup> This

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<sup>27</sup> Fossum, pp 88-89.

<sup>28</sup> Hooker, "Transfiguration," p. 68.

<sup>29</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homily 56 on Matthew 17*, 1, in McGuckin, p. 174.

<sup>30</sup> See G.B. Caird, "The Transfiguration," *Expository Times* 67 (1955-56) p. 292: Peter 'simply blurted out the first thing that came into his head.'

<sup>31</sup> For a summary of the various suggestions, see Heil, pp. 116-118.

<sup>32</sup> For this view, see Boobyer, pp. 76-79, and H. Riesenfeld, *Jésus Transfiguré: L'arrière-Plan Du Récit Évangélique De La Transfiguration De Notre-Seigneur* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1947) pp. 265-80.

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., Thrall, pp. 308-309 and Öhler, pp. 208-209.

context would certainly cohere with the fact that Jesus is wearing the proper attire, clad in the garments of heaven. Peter's mistake would then lie in equating Moses and Elijah with Jesus, placing all three on the same level, as if there were no difference between them. If so, his mistake is quickly countered by the divine voice from the cloud, which singles out Jesus alone, and by the sudden disappearance of Moses and Elijah. This third explanation makes some sense, but it too is not without problems. Why is nothing said of Moses and Elijah's raiment, if such be the case? And why should Peter think such flimsy constructions would achieve his aim of providing permanent abodes for the three 'holy ones'?

The simplest and most popular explanation is that Peter's wants to hold onto the experience and prolong the glory in any way he can, including the marvellous presence of Moses and Elijah. Understandably, he does not want this terrifying yet exhilarating moment to end. In this view, Peter fails to appreciate the future eschatological significance of what is revealed on the mountain and the necessity of Jesus' intervening suffering and death. As in the previous scene—with which the transfiguration is so closely bound—it becomes clear that Peter still wants Jesus to bypass the cross (8:32). This view is attractive as far as it goes, particularly if we detect a mistaken kind of eschatology in Peter's desires: his assumption that the end time has already come. However, this interpretation explains *that* but not *how* he misunderstands. No more than previous options does it demonstrate precisely how three temporary shelters can achieve the permanence Peter has in mind.

It is not easy to choose between these interpretations; all have possibilities and all have problems. It is most likely that we are in no position to tell exactly what Peter does intend.<sup>34</sup> Mark makes no effort to explain specifically what Peter's words denote and our attempts to pinpoint his meaning may, in fact, take us beyond the scope of the text. If this is right, a number of biblical and symbolic associations will naturally occur to the well-read reader—the feast of Tabernacles, the tent of meeting, the eternal dwellings of the righteous—but none can be pinned down with any certainty. We are left puzzled by Peter's 'uncertain and confused offer',<sup>35</sup> a puzzle that Mark himself does not attempt to resolve. Indeed, it may be that Peter himself is unclear of his precise meaning, his words being a spontaneous outburst provoked by the confusing emotions that the transfiguration evokes. Thus, while the three tents may well have symbolic value in Mark's tale, they are clearly an inadequate symbol, either inept or positively misleading. Peter's words reveal his misunderstanding when confronted by the glorious mystery of God's reign and the path that it takes to attain fulfilment.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to conclude that Peter is entirely wrong in his impulses. Along with his misunderstanding is joy at being present at such an event. His fear at its unexpected majesty and glory may, in any case, be closer to awe than mere fright,<sup>36</sup> although it is not easy to separate the two, especially in Mark's Gospel. Peter is right on both counts, even if Mark's language seems understated. Joy and fear are the normal human emotions to an epiphany and, at one level, entirely appropriate. Peter's immediate reaction, that 'it is good that we are here',<sup>37</sup> is also fitting; after all, Jesus has brought him up the mountain for precisely this purpose. The fact that the three disciples cannot grasp the experience and so misunderstand it does not detract from what they have genuinely seen and perceived. The change in Jesus' body and the appearance of Moses and Elijah are indeed uniquely 'good' (*kalon*), just as it is 'good' for the three disciples to behold the beauty unveiled before them.<sup>38</sup> Confronted by these two extraordinary figures of the past, and in company with a radically altered yet still recognisable Jesus, Peter rightly 'recognises their indissoluble connection with Christ.'<sup>39</sup> For this reason, Peter's use of the title 'Rabbi' is surprisingly minimal in this context (though changed by both Matthew and

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<sup>34</sup> So Heil, pp. 118-27, who thinks the audience finds resonances in all three views.

<sup>35</sup> McGuckin, p. 72 speaks of a 'somewhat foolish and misplaced' offer.

<sup>36</sup> V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1952) p. 391.

<sup>37</sup> Note the echo of the word 'here' (*hōde*) from 9:1.

<sup>38</sup> The adjective *kalos* originally meant beautiful rather than good; both aspects are present here.

<sup>39</sup> Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 4.22, in McGuckin, p. 252.

Luke), especially given his faith-confession of the week before (8:29). Perhaps Peter is stammering, too overcome by what is happening to know what he is saying. Overall, his response betrays a mixture of insight, misunderstanding and awe.<sup>40</sup>

Peter's response is followed, almost at once, by the intervention of the overshadowing cloud and the words of the divine voice: 'This is my beloved Son; listen to him' (9:7). While being symbolic in themselves, these also help to elucidate the symbolic meaning of what has already taken place. Inasmuch as Peter is placing the three heavenly beings on an equal footing, the voice functions as a corrective to Peter's misapprehension (although Jesus at least has priority on his list): 'Peter wanted three tabernacles but the heavenly response showed him that we have but one.'<sup>41</sup> Yet the cloud and the voice are more than correctives; they are integral to the transfiguration. The voice from the cloud reveals the hidden, divine presence behind this event, the origin and goal of all that happens. It also functions as an interpretation of what has happened to Jesus, both in his bodily transposition and the appearance of his heavenly attendants.<sup>42</sup> In each case, we are told, these are the tangible symbols indicating his identity as the beloved Son.

The cloud itself is not a natural phenomenon, any more than the light, despite the common occurrence of cloud on high mountain peaks. Its sudden appearance is miraculous and seems to embrace only the three heavenly figures.<sup>43</sup> The verb 'overshadow' in the Greek Old Testament means literally 'to cast a shade', with the sense of covering or even sheltering ().<sup>44</sup> This suggests that the cloud actually conceals Jesus, Moses and Elijah from the gaze of the disciples.<sup>45</sup> The fact that the voice comes 'out of the cloud' (9:7) likewise suggests that the disciples are outside, their rôle as onlookers being to bear witness to both cloud and voice. In the Old Testament, and particularly the wilderness tradition, the cloud is associated with the guiding hand of God and the *Shekinah*: the 'pillar of cloud' that leads the children of Israel through the wilderness by day, in addition to the 'pillar of fire' by night (Exod 13:21-22; 40:36-38). The same cloud hovers over the tent of the covenant (Num 9:15-17) and over the mercy seat (Lev 16:2), and is associated with the glory of the Lord (Exod 16:10). Mount Sinai is shrouded in cloud when Moses ascends to receive the law (Exod 24:15-18; 34:5). In each case, the cloud is a symbol of God's saving presence, God's gracious self-manifestation to, and protection of, Israel through exodus and liberation. The cloud thus signals divine presence and divine revelation; it is a 'better tabernacle' than the three suggested by Peter.<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, the Markan narrative at first reading suggests the very opposite: that the cloud conceals rather than reveals; covers rather than uncovers.<sup>47</sup> Although this assumption seems to go against the symbolism of exodus and Sinai where the cloud discloses the reassuring presence of God, the opposite is also true. Even in the Old Testament the cloud as symbol of divine presence conveys a sense of unutterable holiness that stands

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<sup>40</sup> B.M.F. van Iersel, *Mark: A Reader-Response Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) p. 128 exaggerates when he compares this to the worship of the golden calf.

<sup>41</sup> Augustine, *Homily 28*, in McGuckin, p. 276.

<sup>42</sup> On Jesus' bodily transpositions in the Gospels, see G. Ward, "Bodies: The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ," in *Radical Orthodoxy*, ed. J. Millbank, C. Pickstock, and G. Ward (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>43</sup> It is unlikely that the disciples are included in the cloud; see Öhler, pp. 210-11.

<sup>44</sup> At one point Moses cannot enter the tent of meeting because the cloud 'overshadowed' it (Exod 40:34-35); see S. Schulz, "Episkiaziō," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel & G. Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 399-400. The verb *episkiazein* sounds similar to *skênê*, 'tent'.

<sup>45</sup> A. Oepke, "Nephelê," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (1967) p. 908; C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark. An Introduction and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959) p. 292. For Heil, pp. 129-49, the cloud is a vehicle but this is unlikely given that they do not arrive in it.

<sup>46</sup> Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, 12:42, and Proclus of Constantinople, *Oration 8*, both in McGuckin, pp. 162, 185.

<sup>47</sup> The verb to reveal (*apokalyptein*) means literally 'to uncover'.

over against the creaturely world. In Exodus 24, for example, only Moses is permitted to enter the cloud. God's presence thus retains the quality of mystery even in its most profound self-disclosure. That which conceals also reveals. The more that is revealed of God's self-giving in Mark's Gospel (as in the Sinai tradition), the more mysterious, incomprehensible and awesome that divine revelation appears. The cloud signifies 'the visible form of the governing, guiding and yet hidden form of Yahweh's presence'.<sup>48</sup> Mark confronts the disciples with an identity that is both revealed and concealed at the same time: covered over by their inability to comprehend but even more fundamentally by the very mystery of who and what God is, a God who is made known yet remains elusive (see 4:41). Perhaps there is also a sense of the shadowy cloud protecting the three disciples from a sight too awesome for them to contemplate.

It is important at this point to underline that the story of the transfiguration is not just about the word of God. Some have argued that the climax of the transfiguration is the divine voice, with its proclamation of Jesus' identity and confirmation of his teaching.<sup>49</sup> The structure of the story suggests, on the contrary, that the identity of Jesus is revealed first and foremost in his metamorphosis: on their descent down the mountain Jesus forbids the disciples to report 'what they had *seen*' (9:9). The voice from the cloud functions to interpret the significance of the heavenly portents, making clear that what is taking place is the unveiling of Jesus' mysterious identity as the divine Son. The actual transfiguration of Jesus is not a peripheral detail, a setting of the scene, but rather the purpose of the entire episode. His bodily appearance changes because his true identity, hidden from the eyes of the world, is unveiled to the astonished gaze of the disciples. The transfiguration, therefore, does not just vindicate Jesus' teaching on the way of the cross. More fundamentally, it is concerned to unveil the source and certainty of salvation.<sup>50</sup> The divine voice proclaiming Jesus' identity to the disciples as 'the beloved Son' is an interpretative voice, further unfolding the meaning of the transfiguration.

It is true that the title 'son of God' (*huios tou theou*), understood in its precise Old Testament background, is not of itself a title for the Messiah; nor is it essentially divine. An important background text is Psalm 2:7, a royal psalm in which God addresses the newly-crowned king as son, 'begotten' of God, language that is used in a strictly metaphorical sense.<sup>51</sup> In Mark's hands, however, the title gains a more exalted connotation in the light of Jesus' unique relationship to God.<sup>52</sup> It is critically placed within the Markan Gospel, moreover, giving it a context that implies more than the royal associations of the Old Testament. 'Son of God' appears in the heading of the Gospel: 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God' (1:1).<sup>53</sup> The divine voice at Jesus' baptism addresses him directly as 'my beloved Son' (1:11). The Gerasene demoniac, under the influence of multiple demons (who, while being evil, nonetheless inhabit the same cosmic realm), cries out: 'What have I to do with you, Jesus Son of the most high God?' (5:7). In addition to the transfiguration, Jesus on trial admits to the horrified high priest his unique identity as 'the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One' (14:61). Finally, the title 'Son of God' is found on the lips of the Roman centurion immediately after Jesus' death

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<sup>48</sup> Mauser, p. 114.

<sup>49</sup> H.C. Kee, "The Transfiguration in Mark: Epiphany or Apocalyptic Vision," in *Understanding the Sacred Text. Essays in Honor of Morton S. Enslin on the Hebrew Bible and Christian Beginnings*, ed. J. Reumann (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1972) pp. 139, 144, 148, W.R. Stegner, "The Use of Scripture in Two Narratives of Early Jewish Christianity (Matth 4.1-11; Mark 9.2-8)," in *Early Christian Interpretation of the Scriptures of Israel: Investigations and Proposals*, ed. C.A. Evans and J.A. Sanders (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) p. 111, and Öhler, pp. 200-201, 209, 213; on Mark's editing of the original story, along these lines, see E. Best, "The Markan Redaction of the Transfiguration," in *International Congress on Biblical Studies*, ed. E.A. Livingstone (Berlin: Akademie, 1982).

<sup>50</sup> Ziesler, p. 267 describes the transfiguration as 'a piece of Markan soteriology'.

<sup>51</sup> It is possible that there is an allusion to Isaac here (Gen 22); see McCurley, pp. 78-80.

<sup>52</sup> Kee, pp. 144, 148-49, argues that Jesus' glory is not divine but, like Moses, borrowed.

<sup>53</sup> Assuming 'Son of God' is part of the original Markan text.

(15:39). Jesus' sonship, in other words, is 'linked with key moments in the life of Jesus',<sup>54</sup> including his transfiguration. It signifies his royal status within the coming-yet-present reign of God. It expresses his filial obedience to God as his sovereign Father who, for Jesus, is utterly trustworthy, even if that trust is still to be vindicated in the future.<sup>55</sup> It also includes, alongside the royalty and sovereignty, a profound sense of intimacy: as God's uniquely beloved, Jesus addresses him as 'abba' and 'my God' (14:35; 15:34).<sup>56</sup> Mark's use of 'Son' thus outlines an identity that cannot be encapsulated even within Old Testament categories,<sup>57</sup> and suggests an identity that transcends any human framework. In this sense, Jesus' sonship is unique rather than representative.<sup>58</sup> The voice from the cloud confirms Jesus' status as both royal and divine.<sup>59</sup>

In Markan Christology ... there can be no dichotomy between a royal interpretation of Jesus' divine sonship and a concept of that sonship that sees Jesus as participating in some way in God's very power and being.<sup>60</sup>

The Gospel which presents the most human side to Jesus—his suffering, struggle and anguish—also emphasises his radiance and authority as Son, an authority that no other possesses, not even such superlative prophets as Moses and Elijah.<sup>61</sup>

Jesus' identity as the beloved Son is the basis on which the divine voice adjures the disciples to 'listen to him'. This instruction makes particular sense of the journey to Jerusalem where Jesus will teach the reluctant disciples the significance of the way of the cross. It reinforces the passion and resurrection predictions, validating the 'economy of the cross',<sup>62</sup> and communicating to the reader that the path Jesus takes is the path of divine necessity, undertaken by the Son in obedience to the Father. Yet the injunction is more than that. In Moses' farewell speech, as we have already noted, the people are promised a prophet-like-Moses who will be the voice of God and to whom Israel will listen (Deut 18:15-18). Just as Moses is the mouth of God in the old covenant, therefore, so Jesus is the mouth of God in the new. Yet Jesus is more than a prophet in Mark's narrative; the disciples are not instructed to give heed to Moses but to Jesus. As the Son of the Father, his association with the divine voice is much closer—so much so that everything he speaks is directly from the mouth of God. To hear Jesus' words is to hear the divine voice. The proximity of the cloud to Jesus, as well as the divine speech that issues from it, makes that point clear. The word of God is radically identified with the teaching of Jesus; like God's word it is utterly effective and consequential. As the divine Son, Jesus at the transfiguration embodies the mouth, the word, the speech and thus the deeds, of God's own self.

With this beloved Son, who is the voice of God, the three disciples are finally left alone and at once begin their descent down the mountain (9:8). The sensory signs are gone from sight and hearing: the light, the cloud, the voice, the presence of Moses and Elijah. All is as it was on their arrival—Jesus has resumed his

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<sup>54</sup> M.M. Thompson, *The Promise of the Father. Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) p. 91.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* p. 92.

<sup>56</sup> The overtones of intimacy should not be pressed; see J. Barr, "Abba Isn't Daddy," *Journal of Theological Studies* 39 (1988) and Thompson, p. 90.

<sup>57</sup> See E. Schweizer, *Jesus* (London: SCM, 1971) pp. 13-51.

<sup>58</sup> Fletcher-Louis, p. 248.

<sup>59</sup> S.C. Barton, "The Transfiguration of Christ According to Mark and Matthew: Christology and Anthropology," in *Auferstehung—Resurrection*, ed. F. Avemarie and H. Lichtenberger (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 2001) pp. 241-42.

<sup>60</sup> Marcus, p. 72

<sup>61</sup> Hooker, *St. Mark* p. 218

<sup>62</sup> McGuckin, p. 26.

familiar form and appearance. There is something startling, however, about the way Mark describes the sudden disappearance of the heavenly symbols, as if the disciples stare for a moment, rubbing their eyes, as bemused by the vanishing as by their sudden appearance. The conversation that follows does little to enlighten them (9:9-11). Although they may not yet realise it, they are now armed for the approaching journey and its disturbing end by the sight of the vision and the hearing of the voice. Neither will they comprehend until the tale is told: when the Shepherd, having been struck, rises again to re-gather his scattered sheep (14:27-28).

The transfiguration not only holds a critical place in the centre of the Gospel and at the beginning of the journey to Jerusalem, it also shares characteristics with other episodes at the beginning and end of the Gospel. The first of these is the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, a puzzling account which Mark narrates in the briefest and baldest of terms (1:9-11). At first glance Jesus is simply one of a large crowd coming from everywhere to be baptized in the Jordan river ‘while confessing their sins’ (1:5). Yet almost at once this impression is revised. In place of the confession of sins, Jesus ascends from the water and sees the heavens open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove (1:10). The divine voice speaks out, boldly acclaiming him: ‘you are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased’ (1:11). The voice at the baptism is the same voice that speaks at the transfiguration, in similar wording, but addressed only to Jesus. What we have in the transfiguration is thus an opening of the heavens like the baptism, a ‘tearing open’, as Mark describes it, effected by the Spirit of God: not the dove this time but the presence of Moses and Elijah and the cloud; not the water but the splendour of light on the mountain.<sup>63</sup>

Yet in one sense, the symbolism of the baptism and transfiguration seems to work in opposing ways. The baptism is a *descent* into the waters while the transfiguration involves an *ascent* up the mountain. Mark leaves the enigma of Jesus’ baptism till later in the Gospel. After the third passion and resurrection prediction (10:32-34), it becomes clear that Jesus understands baptism as a symbol, along with the cup, of his descent into rejection and death, his identification with sin and suffering.<sup>64</sup> Significantly, it is James and John, two of the three witnesses of the transfiguration who, perhaps on that basis, request seats of honour in the coming reign of God. To them Jesus throws the challenge: ‘Are you able to drink the cup which I myself drink, or to be baptized with the baptism in which I am baptized?’ (10:38). The point is more explicit in Matthew’s account of the baptism, but it is also implied in Mark, that Jesus descends into sin and suffering as part of his obedience to the Father, submerging himself in the depths of the human condition. The baptism is thus the first indication of the shadow of the cross in Mark’s Gospel, part of the ‘way of the Lord’ (1:3), although the reader does not yet perceive it.<sup>65</sup> Jesus’ descent into the water is symbolic of his whole ministry, a ministry that climaxes in his death on the cross—the nadir, the lowest point, of his descent into rejection and death. The divine voice interprets the baptism in two ways: it reveals that Jesus’ journey into suffering and sin is the divine will, and it discloses that Jesus will take this path not simply as an ordinary mortal but as the beloved Son of the Father. The descent of the baptism seems a long way from the ascent of the transfiguration.

At the same time, the opposition and parallelism between baptism and transfiguration, between the river and the mountain, coalesce. Jesus descends into the waters and the Spirit descends upon him from heaven. In the transfiguration, Jesus ascends the mountain, the border between heaven and earth, where the cloud overshadows him. Yet Jesus also rises from the water—ascends—and after the transfiguration he descends from the mountain to begin the journey to Jerusalem. In both senses, whether ascending or descending, Jesus takes ‘the way of the Lord’. Mark does not explicitly connect the cloud at the transfiguration with the dove at the baptism, although

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<sup>63</sup> C. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man. A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990) p. 251

<sup>64</sup> McGuckin, p. 78 and Caird, p. 292.

<sup>65</sup> The background to this Markan motif is probably Second-Isaiah; so Marcus, p. 48.

early interpreters believed the connection was close: ‘The voice of the Father came from the cloud of the Spirit’.<sup>66</sup> The cloud certainly parallels the dove-like Spirit from heaven at Jesus’ baptism, from a narrative perspective, even if Mark does not make explicit the theological association. In any case, the geographical symbols assist to unveil Jesus’ identity and mission in relation to God. The one who as Son of Man is ‘Lord of the sabbath’ (2:28) has traversed the low paths and the high paths, his journey taking him to geographical extremes. By the end of the Gospel, Jesus has plumbed the cosmic heights and depths, revealing his identity as the divine Son and so giving his life as ‘a ransom for many’ (10:45).

Although the actual location of the transfiguration, as we have seen, is never named in Mark, it is interesting from a symbolic point of view that Mount Hermon has at its foot a chasm with a deep pool of water. According to the Jewish first century AD historian Josephus, this pool was unable to be plumbed; indeed, it was regarded by pagans in the area as the entrance to the Underworld.<sup>67</sup> Without denying the persistency of the tradition that identifies Mount Tabor as the site of the transfiguration, we can observe how the topography of Hermon accords with Mark’s symbolic universe. Jesus ascends the heights and descends into the depths, reaching up to heaven and going down into the horror of hell and darkness:

My soul is troubled within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and Hermon, from the small mountain. Deep summons deep at the voice of your cataracts; all your billows and your waves have gone over me. (Ps 41:7-8 LXX).

This is the mysterious and circuitous path that the Lord’s way takes, from height to depth, and only the beloved Son is fit to take it.

After the transfiguration, the third moment of epiphany is the death and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>68</sup> At the beginning of the passion narrative, in the context of the plot to kill Jesus, the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus’ head seems to possess an understanding of his death and royal status that his disciples, particularly the twelve, lamentably lack (14:1-11).<sup>69</sup> A little later on another mountain, the Mount of Olives, Jesus will again take Peter, James and John aside—this time to face in obedience, through the power of prayer, his horrifying death and overcome his revulsion at what awaits him (14:32-42). Once more Jesus reveals his identity on a mountain, this time paradoxically in intense suffering and anguish, and once again the inner three disciples fail, for all their efforts to comprehend. Both mountains—the mount of transfiguration and the Mount of Olives—are equally revealing of Jesus’ identity and the fallibility of his disciples.<sup>70</sup>

In a similar way, the actual manner of Jesus’ death has overtones of an epiphany. Jesus dies not with a sense of confident assurance (as in Luke’s account, Lk 23:46) but with a cry of dereliction on his lips, given both in Jesus’ mother tongue, Aramaic, and in Greek: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (15:34). Some have assumed that, because Jesus is quoting the opening words of Psalm 22, a psalm of the righteous sufferer, his final utterance is really evoking the whole psalm, and particularly the ending with its note of praise and thanksgiving (22:21-31).<sup>71</sup> But such a supposition misses the point and is in danger of domesticating the

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<sup>66</sup> See, e.g., Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentary on Matthew* 17:3, and John of Damascus, *Akrostich*, 18, both in McGuckin, pp. 258, 222.

<sup>67</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War*, I.404; see Fletcher-Louis, pp. 267-74.

<sup>68</sup> Myers, pp. 390-92.

<sup>69</sup> Heil, p. 188.

<sup>70</sup> McGuckin, p. 65, speaks of the parallel ‘between the glorious epiphany of the Metamorphosis and the sorrowful epiphany of the Agony in Gethsemane’; see also A. Kenny, “The Transfiguration and the Agony in the Garden,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 19 (1957) pp. 444-45.

<sup>71</sup> See D.E. Nineham, *Saint Mark* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963) pp. 428-29 and D. Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984) pp. 123-24.

starkness of the Markan narrative.<sup>72</sup> The ending of the psalm is not ultimately irrelevant, given the message of the resurrection in the next chapter, but it is not immediately relevant to Jesus' death. Mark's story here, as in all the Gospels, is highly stylised—not written as a journalistic account, but displaying the inner meaning of the outer event. Difficult as it may be to grasp, Jesus' cry, for Mark, implies the very real separation of the Son from the Father. The abandonment is more than a fleeting emotion on Jesus' part: the divine voice which has spoken out directly at the baptism and transfiguration now remains terrifyingly silent.<sup>73</sup> Yet Jesus has already chosen this separation knowingly and willingly, though not without struggle and anguish, as his prayer at Gethsemane indicates (14:32-42). Just as at the baptism he descends into the waters of the Jordan and ascends to the opening of the heavens—the dove and the divine voice—so now he descends symbolically into the waters of sin, suffering, evil, desolation and death. This represents 'the lowest depths of the hiddenness of the Son of God.'<sup>74</sup> For the sake of the sinful and the suffering, the Son yields up to God more even than his life; he surrenders the presence of the Father whose will he has obeyed in all things. Here Mark shows in the starkest of terms 'the oneness of Jesus with humanity ... in which he shares human despair to the full.'<sup>75</sup> Jesus takes upon himself the despair, alienation and lostness of humankind.

Yet there is another, paradoxical sense in which the 'voice' of God is not utterly silent in this narrative, at least to the attentive ear. The two apocalyptic signs may be said to represent that voice, though muted and ambiguous.<sup>76</sup> The three-hour darkness is often taken as a symbol of divine judgement and the ending of the old order (see Exod 10:21-23),<sup>77</sup> but it is just as likely to be symbolic of absence and mourning: the Father mourning the death and separation of the Son (see Amos 8:9-10).<sup>78</sup> Indeed, both elements may be present, the divine voice expressing anger as well as grief. Immediately after Jesus' death (15:37), Mark uses the same imagery of tearing open as at the baptism, although this time it is not the heavens but the veil of the temple (15:38, using the same verb, *schizein*, as at 1:10). While this could signify God's judgement on the old order of things, a judgement associated already with Jesus' presence in the temple (11:12-21; 13:2; 14:58), it is better read—at least in its primary meaning—as a radical sign of opening: Jesus' death gives unlimited access to the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies.<sup>79</sup> The tearing open at the horizontal level may seem opposed to the vertical tearing at the baptism, but both really express the same idea. With Jesus' extraordinary death, open access between heaven and earth is assured; God has indeed torn open the heavens and come down (Isa 64:1).<sup>80</sup> As a consequence, the death of Jesus 'marks the turning point of the ages.'<sup>81</sup>

That the cross is divinely sanctioned is confirmed in the words of the centurion immediately after Jesus' death: 'Truly this was God's Son' (14:39).<sup>82</sup> This Roman soldier is the last person we would expect to make such

<sup>72</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave. A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1994) pp. 1049-51, argues that the cry expresses anguish from 'an utterly forlorn Jesus' who is 'isolated and estranged' (p. 1050).

<sup>73</sup> van Iersel, p. 189 and Myers, p. 389.

<sup>74</sup> Cranfield, p. 458.

<sup>75</sup> Hooker, *St. Mark* p. 375.

<sup>76</sup> For Brown, p. 1044, the cry—which, he argues, is uttered once—is an apocalyptic sign.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* vol. 2, pp. 1035-36.

<sup>78</sup> E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark. A Commentary on the Gospel*, trans. D.H. Madvig (London: SPCK, 1970) p. 352.

<sup>79</sup> This could be the inner curtain to the Holy of Holies or the outer veil between the porch and the sanctuary. Josephus, *Jewish War*, V.212-214, says that the veil of the sanctuary was decorated in bright colours with a picture of the vault of heaven; see Schmidt, pp. 229.

<sup>80</sup> C.A. Evans, *Mark 8:27 - 16:20*, ed. R.P. Martin, vol. 34B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001) pp. 508-9, sees the torn veil as the result of Jesus' death-shout at 15:37.

<sup>81</sup> Moloney, p. 328.

<sup>82</sup> The Greek could mean 'a son of God'; this does not fit Mark's evangelical purpose at this point.

a declaration—the only time in Mark's Gospel that a human being recognises Jesus' sonship. It parallels the divine voice at the baptism and transfiguration, as well as Jesus' own voice at his trial. Admittedly in Mark's story it is often the unexpected people who possess insight, while the insiders remain relatively blind. This is true of the presence of the Galilæan women standing at a distance (15:40-41), and Jesus' burial by Joseph of Arimathæa, a member of the Jewish council (15:42-46), all of whom contrast markedly with the absent twelve.<sup>83</sup> Even so, it is extraordinary that the one who has crucified Jesus recognises his identity—and particularly in the context of horror, darkness and death.

But what is it that the Roman soldier sees in Jesus' death to lead him to such a conclusion? At a surface level, the scene reveals nothing but a man dying with a sense of anguish that his God has abandoned him. Of the two apocalyptic signs, only the three-hour period of darkness is accessible to the centurion, the rending of the veil being outside his awareness.<sup>84</sup> It is almost unimaginable that the soldier should recognise not just an innocent victim but the beloved Son in whom the Father takes delight, the one whose coming tears open the heavens, whose glory flashes from the mountain, whose words above all others are to be heeded. In Markan terms, however, what happens is a miracle: only through divine revelation can this Gentile outsider discern in that appalling death, even in its pain and dereliction, God's Son. Jesus' identity is not lost at this point; indeed, for Mark, it is most clearly visible in his act of obedience to the Father and solidarity with a sinful, suffering world. In a situation that bespeaks only the absence of God—violence, suffering, pain, rejection, death—Mark indicates the vibrant presence of God, a presence predicated entirely on Jesus' unique identity. This is the paradox of Mark's understanding of the cross: Jesus' death reveals that God is to be found precisely in those places where, to all intents and purposes, God is absent.

The centre of Mark's Gospel, as we have already seen, consists of a diptych: two portraits of Jesus that depict his identity. At Caesarea Philippi there is a revelation of Jesus as the crucified Son of Man; on the mount of transfiguration there is a revelation of his future glory and true identity. So too the closing scenes of Mark's Gospel present a similar pattern. The death of Jesus, in the first scene, sets forth the suffering and rejection of the Son of Man. This is followed, in the second scene by the epiphany at the empty tomb (16:1-8). Ironically, this takes place after the burial which should end the whole story of Jesus and after the heavy stone has been pressed against the mouth of the tomb, emphasising, in human terms, the absolute finality of death. At the beginning, middle and end of the Gospel, life and death are thus interwoven, the victory of life emerging only through the paths of the dead.

Perhaps not surprisingly, there are a number of parallels between the transfiguration and the empty tomb story. These similarities do not imply that the two stories are identical or belong to the same genre,<sup>85</sup> but they do indicate that Mark has shaped the moments of epiphany in his Gospel so that they cohere with one another. On the mountain, Jesus is present with his clothing transformed and radiant, in the company of two heavenly figures and with three disciples who respond in fear and incomprehension. At the empty tomb is a young man, a heavenly figure in white clothing—the garb of heaven—in company with the women, three disciples who, like Peter at the transfiguration, are afraid and do not know how to respond. Just as Peter makes an incomprehensible response to the presence of Moses and Elijah, so the women disciples take to their heels and run, too overcome

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<sup>83</sup> The woman who anoints Jesus' head at the beginning of the passion recognises a kingship that will be manifest ironically in his crucifixion (14:3-9); this incident parallels the holy women at the cross.

<sup>84</sup> Against this, see H.M. Jackson, "The Death of Jesus in Mark and the Miracle from the Cross," *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987) pp. 22-32, who argues that the centurion does see the rending of the veil, which is caused by Jesus' last cry.

<sup>85</sup> So C.H. Dodd, "The Appearances of the Risen Christ: An Essay in Form-Criticism of the Gospels," in *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R.H. Lightfoot*, ed. D.E. Nineham (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957).

to speak a word (16:8), bringing the Gospel of Mark to its abrupt end.<sup>86</sup> And, just as at the transfiguration three (male) disciples are instructed to listen to the Son—though not to tell until after the resurrection—so now three (female) disciples are enjoined to listen and then to ‘go, tell’ (16:7). The women do not succeed any better than their male counterparts, though perhaps their fear, like that of Peter, James and John on the mountain, is closer to awe than fright.<sup>87</sup> Yet the reaction of both groups is in one sense perfectly understandable. Not until they see Jesus in Galilee (‘there you will see him’, 16:7) will the two Marys and Salome finally understand, just as at the transfiguration Peter, James and John will not understand until after the resurrection (9:9-10).

Both on the cross and at the empty tomb—in the last words of Jesus and in the young man’s message (‘he is not here’)—the reader thus confronts a painful absence and learns that it is paradoxically the manifestation of a deeper presence. The theme of presence-in-absence is found in both the crucifixion and resurrection narratives where Jesus’ death and the empty tomb convey a profound and tangible sense of absence. Yet the words of the centurion and the message of the angel manifest the same set of oppositions: life in place of death, beauty in place of ugliness, union instead of separation, joy and hope over-riding abandonment and despair. The heavens have been torn open, God’s self-revealing has taken place in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. It is the beloved Son who suffers and dies, who experiences the Father’s abandonment, whose crucified body is laid in the tomb. Not just an ordinary human being, but the one who is uniquely loved by God, who teaches the words of God, who unveils the revelation of God on the basis of his identity, whose life and death mysteriously manifest the divine splendour, even in the deepest moments of desolation and darkness. Absence and presence work paradoxically to reveal the radical nature of God’s reign, the intermingling of suffering and glory. Lying at the heart of Mark’s Gospel, the transfiguration encapsulates this paradox: the revealing of the Son in light and glory as he commences his portentous journey to Jerusalem.

The transfiguration in the Gospel of Mark is, in part, an apocalyptic revelation of the future coming of the Son of Man in glory, a ‘premonition of the New Creation’.<sup>88</sup> It is equally concerned to display Jesus’ identity arching across the earthly and the heavenly. This selfhood, as revealed on the cross, at the empty tomb, in his future appearances in Galilee, and at his parousia, is something he possesses from the beginning of the Gospel: in his baptism, his proclaiming of the reign of God, and the words and deeds of his ministry. What is extraordinary is the way Mark links baptism, transfiguration, crucifixion, resurrection, and parousia. All these moments of epiphany are connected inextricably to the cross, just as suffering, humiliation, rejection and death are joined to the manifestation of beauty and glory. For Mark, the mount of transfiguration and the Mount of Olives belong together as equally revealing of Jesus’ identity and God’s self-giving glory. By the end of the Gospel we cannot see Jesus as the beloved Son except in relation to the way of the cross and the transfiguration. Mark’s point is not just that Jesus engages radically with human suffering but rather that the beloved Son, revealed in heavenly glory and beauty on the mountain as the harbinger of God’s future, and the suffering Son of Man, dying in desolation on the cross, are one and the same person.

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<sup>86</sup> Assuming, with the majority, that the Gospel ends at 16:8. Against this, see Schweizer, *Mark* pp. 365-67 and Evans, pp. 550-1.

<sup>87</sup> So R.H. Lightfoot, *The Gospel Message of St. Mark* (Oxford: Clarendon) pp. 87-89; see also J.L. Magness, *Sense and Absence: Structure and Suspension in the Ending of Mark's Gospel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986) pp. 87-105.

<sup>88</sup> W. Wink, "Mark 9:2-8," *Interpretation* 36 (1982) p. 65.