

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



**PATREON**

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

response of Christian faith, which, claiming, enjoying, using the grace of God in Christ, is more and more seriously and bravely accepting the burden and the battle of a life in and for Christ, which, saved from sin and death, surrenders itself to be the means He may use to save all, that where sin reigned abundantly unto death, grace through righteousness may reign more abundantly unto eternal life. Thus is Christian theology in its recent progress coming to conceive more ethically the whole Christian salvation from its roots in the heart of God to its fruits in the life of man, and thus too is it becoming more practical. The present position is full of promise of a closer communion with, a clearer vision of, and a higher and wider obedience unto God in Jesus Christ, and this gain has been in large measure due to the influence of Conscience on Creed.

ALFRED E. GARVIE.

*THE LIFE OF CHRIST ACCORDING TO  
ST. MARK.<sup>1</sup>*

XXIX. THE TRANSFIGURATION, IX. 2-13.

THE episode of the Transfiguration is connected by St. Mark with the previous incidents as part of the crisis which was the prologue to the Passion. After six days Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and took them by themselves to a high hill, probably by night, possibly moonlit, or illumined by flashes of lightning. We are not told where this hill was ; six days, or more, had elapsed since Peter's confession, and had probably been spent in journeying ; neither is it clear that the incidents which

<sup>1</sup> These studies do not profess to be an adequate historical and doctrinal account of Christ, but are an attempt to set forth the impression which St. Mark's narrative would make on a reader who had no other source of information, and was not acquainted with Christian dogmatics.

follow occurred immediately. The mention of Moses and Elijah suggests Horeb, the mountain with which the names of both were associated; and it does not seem altogether impossible that Jesus, like Elijah, in His extremity, sought some special manifestation of the presence and grace of God in the hallowed solitude of the most ancient sanctuary of Israel. But, of course, this is only a surmise; at any rate Jesus led His three disciples to some remote hillside, deliberately chosen, and reached by a special journey.

According to His custom Jesus felt that the crisis called for a season of fellowship with God, but now for the first time He sought the presence and sympathy of His disciples; the faith which discerned His Messiahship when His fortunes were desperate bound them closely to Him by new bonds of affection. The three whose company He sought had also gone with Him to the house of Jairus; they were probably chosen because they were not only leaders among the Apostles, but also associated with Jesus in closer personal friendship than their fellows. It was not St. Mark's purpose to describe the private life of Jesus, and indeed during His ministry He had little leisure from His public mission; such a life must be lonely as far as human intimacy is concerned. Yet the Prophet found amongst His disciples some with whom His relations were specially touched by personal affection. Such were the three; and one of them was Peter, who had rebuked his Master and been rebuked by Him. Jesus did not exact from His followers adulation or servile acquiescence; He could appreciate honest zeal and loyal affection, even when they led to hasty and mistaken judgments and to rough criticism of Himself. The loving confidence between Jesus and Peter was so great that He could apostrophize him as Satan, the adversary, and within a few days could ask Peter to share His most intimate fellowship with God, and Peter could accept.

There must have been much curiosity amongst the disciples as to the nocturnal absences of Jesus, which had often been followed by some unexpected action; it was after one of them that He abruptly broke off His first ministry at Capernaum, and after another that He was seen walking on the water. He may have told them that He met with God, and they, versed as they were in the language and ideas of the Old Testament, may have thought that He communed with some visible Angel of the Lord, and received from him instruction, commands and reinforcement of spiritual energy. So that, as the Three followed their Master up the hill, their nerves were strung with excited anticipation of what they were to see and hear. They reached the spot which He had chosen for His devotions, and from the analogy of the scene at Gethsemane we may suppose that He withdrew a little, but still remained within sight and near enough to be heard if He prayed aloud. As the Apostles watched Him they were startled by a change in His appearance, perhaps as the moon emerged from some obscuring cloud, or as a flash of lightning lit up the scene; His garments shone with supernatural radiance; they became "exceeding white as snow, so as no fuller on earth can white them"—whether any further change took place we are not told. They caught fragments of His speech, in which He seemed to be addressing Moses and Elijah; and they beheld an apparition of Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. We are not told the subject or the nature of the conversation, probably because the disciples were not close enough to hear distinctly. None the less they were overcome with terror at what they saw and heard, and Peter's natural impetuosity led him to seek relief in words; not that he knew what to say, but speech was easier than silence. "Rabbi," he said, "it is good for us to be here: let us make three booths, one for Thee, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." We need

not discuss these words, since we are told that Peter did not know what to say.<sup>1</sup> They were the utterance of an incoherent mind, and no notice was taken of them. Next we are told that a cloud overshadowed the little group, and there came a voice out of the cloud, perhaps mingled with rolling thunder, "This is My beloved Son, hear ye Him." The testimony given to Jesus Himself at His baptism is now repeated in the hearing of the disciples. Their strange experiences rendered them prostrate with fear, but after a while they came to themselves, apparently with a sudden start, and looking round they discovered that the marvels of the night had disappeared—the cloud had passed away; Moses and Elijah had vanished; they were alone with Jesus, and their Master had resumed His ordinary appearance; the supernatural radiance no longer shone from His garments.

The narrative impresses one as having been composed from the reminiscence of an eye-witness, probably Peter, who was specially interested in his own feelings and experiences, and in what he himself said and did. The version just given involves a measure of interpretation which may be justified in a few words. The view that the incident took place by night is supported by the analogy of the seasons of prayer after the Feeding of the Five Thousand and in Gethsemane, and by the stress laid on the radiance of Jesus' garments; but as the disciples not only saw Jesus, but recognized His companions, we may assume moonlight or lightning, unless indeed Moses and Elijah also were visible by some supernatural radiance of their own. It is true that the narrative concludes by telling us that the disciples looked round and saw only Jesus and themselves, but possibly the sun had just risen.

<sup>1</sup> The "answered" of the E.V. in verse 5 is misleading; to the English reader it suggests a reply to words addressed to the speaker, whereas in New Testament Greek the term is also used of any speech called forth by events, circumstances, etc.

The Transfiguration is described from a subjective rather than from an objective point of view, and the description gives us the impression made upon a narrator who was quite unconscious of his subjectivity, and who did not always draw a clear distinction between subjective and objective, to whom the appearances of a vision would be as real as the actualities of everyday life. Moreover the nature and circumstances of the incident did not make for either accurate observation or exact recollection: the desolate hillside, the solitary night, the uncertain illumination of the moon or of intermittent lightning, the excited spirits of the disciples overawed by the personality of Jesus and by His mysterious audience with God and with supernatural beings—all these influences combined to produce the impression at the time, and to determine the form it assumed in the memory after mature reflection. Hence it is impossible now to go behind the narrative, and reconstruct an accurate account of the actual occurrence. Nevertheless such uncertainty does not destroy the significance of the incident. Here perhaps more than anywhere else we see Jesus inspiring awe and terror. It is one of the most marvellous features of St. Mark's narrative that the most forcible impression it leaves of Jesus is of His simple, unaffected kindness, He stands before us as the most lovable of men; and yet at the same time we are made to feel that this Friend of man is the most august and imperial figure that ever appeared upon the stage of history. His serenity kindles at times into consuming fire, and His meekness becomes charged with mystic force which daunts presumptuous selfishness. The secret of this marvel is His intimate fellowship with the Unseen; the man who has unusual supernatural dealings with the spiritual world is always an object of awe and wonder. George Eliot thus describes the impression made by Savonarola's public prayers:—

The next instant the pulpit was no longer empty. A figure covered from head to foot in black cowl and mantle had entered it, and was kneeling with bent head and with face turned away. It seemed a weary time to the eager people while the black figure knelt and the monks chanted. But the stillness was not broken, for the Frate's audiences with heaven were yet charged with electric awe for that mixed multitude, so that those who had already the will to stone him felt their arms unnerved.<sup>1</sup>

The experience of the disciples at the Transfiguration must have been the more thrilling because they were the spectators for the first time of the solemn audience of Jesus of Nazareth with His Heavenly Father, and saw Him conversing on equal terms with the spirits of the mighty dead. It is difficult to say which alternative would furnish the more striking testimony to the spiritual power and dignity of Jesus, whether the actual appearance of Moses and Elijah, or a subjective vision due to the impression made by Jesus and His prayers on the minds of the disciples.

It is more difficult to realize what the Transfiguration meant to Jesus. No doubt He found support amidst the dark shadows that gathered thickly about His path; and the reference to Moses and Elijah shows that He was relieved of one perplexity. Jesus had been driven into antagonism to the Mosaic Law; He must have been distressed to find Himself in such a position, for He was utterly loyal to the Divine Revelation given in the Old Testament, and full of reverence for Moses; His work and teaching were based upon the Hebrew Scriptures, and apart from them His Messiahship would have been empty and meaningless; to have discredited the Old Testament would have cut the ground from under His own feet. The Transfiguration assured Him that He was the true successor and representative not only of the prophets but also of the legislators of Israel; that while He repudiated the letter of the Law, He was yet enforcing its spirit.

<sup>1</sup> *Romola*, ch. 62.

The disciples would be confirmed in their belief in the Messiahship of Jesus; they would expect His speedy triumph, and would be more eager than ever to proclaim His real character to the world. But they were again checked; as they came down He bade them tell no one what they had seen till the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They did not understand these words about "rising from the dead"; they were expecting not His death but His triumph; they discussed the mystery amongst themselves, but did not ask Jesus, perhaps because His manner forbade any questioning on that point, or perhaps because in their inmost hearts they feared lest His answer should strike a death-blow to their hopes. Their conversation soon returned to the great topic which occupied most of their thoughts, the Messiahship of Jesus. Some one raised a difficulty suggested by current ideas, the coming of the Messiah must be preceded by the re-appearance of Elijah as the forerunner. Apparently this condition had not been fulfilled unless indeed the vision they had just seen was its fulfilment, and yet so transient a visit to earth could scarcely be all that Malachi intended when he said: "I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse." This difficulty they did not hesitate to refer to Jesus, "The scribes say that Elijah must first come." It is curious that there is no explicit reference to the recent vision either in the disciples' question or in Jesus' answer, "Truly Elijah cometh first and restoreth all things, and how it is written of the Son of Man that He must suffer many things and be set at nought; but I say unto you, that Elijah has indeed come, and they have done to him as they pleased, as it is written of him." Jesus again attempts to fix their



thoughts on the coming tragedy which they were so anxious to ignore; yet He does not refuse to meet their difficulty. Elijah had come again in John the Baptist.<sup>1</sup> The passage is important as illustrating the method of interpretation which Jesus used for the Old Testament. Its predictions might be fulfilled in a very elastic sense; the definite statement that Elijah should come again is fulfilled by the coming of John the Baptist in the spirit and power of Elijah; John the Baptist being, as we should say, a second Elijah.

XXX. THE HEALING OF THE DEMONIAK BOY, IX. 14-29.

After leaving the scene of the Transfiguration, Jesus and His three companions rejoined the rest of the disciples. St. Mark's narrative is too fragmentary to allow us to assume that they were close by at the foot of the hill waiting for Jesus. The next incident took place in a populous district, perhaps at some considerable distance. There is nothing to indicate the exact locality, but it was probably in Northern Palestine. We are told that the people were astonished when He appeared, probably because they did not expect Him; it is also possible that at this time His countenance and manner expressed a certain spiritual exaltation inspired by the experiences He had passed through, and the high and tragic resolution He had taken. He found the remaining disciples in the midst of a thronging crowd, engaged in unequal controversy with certain scribes. When Jesus appeared upon the scene, the whole multitude, both the disputants and their audience, ran to Him and greeted Him. He inquired as to the subject of the dispute between the two parties. Apparently neither was eager to reply, but one of the crowd

<sup>1</sup> As in Mark i. 2ff. the "messenger" of Malachi iii. 1 is identified with John the Baptist, it is clear that here also the Evangelist intends us to understand that the Baptist is referred to.

answered that he had brought to Jesus his son, who was afflicted by a dumb spirit, which continually threw him into convulsions. Not finding Jesus, he had sought help from the disciples, but they had not been able to cast out the evil spirit. It was quite natural to seek such relief from the disciples. When they were sent out two by two, it was part of their mission to cast out devils, and apparently they had been successful. Now there were nine of them together, and they could not cast out the demon. Certain scribes, who happened to be present, taunted the disciples with their failure; they and their Master were alike impostors. An angry dispute arose; the disciples would retort that if only Jesus were there, they would soon see that He could cast out demons. And now here He was, in the very nick of time, confronted with a test case. Would He be equal to the occasion?

At the Transfiguration He had received the assurance that His work was the legitimate development of that of Moses and Elijah in spite of His repudiation of the ceremonial law. Now the whole question seemed to be reopened. He found His disciples in fierce controversy with the scribes, who claimed to be the representatives of Moses, staking His reputation on His power to work a miracle, although He had never encouraged them to ground their faith on His mighty works. These were the men who were to carry on His work after He was gone. Even now they misunderstood Him terribly, and there was so little time left for Him to be with them. "O unbelieving generation," He cried, "how long shall I be with you, how long shall I suffer you?" Yet now as ever the appeal of suffering was irresistible to Jesus, and He added, "Bring him to Me." The boy was brought, and as in other cases the excitement caused an acute attack of the malady. The crowd, disciples, scribes, the unhappy father, and the curious spectators, watched to see what Jesus would do. And He, as His

manner was, calm, deliberate, master of Himself and of the situation, asked how long the boy had suffered, and the father answered, "from a child," and dwelt upon the danger and distress that the trouble had brought upon them. Then he grew impatient with the Healer's quiet inactivity, and doubtful of His power to heal. "If Thou canst do anything," he cried, "pity us and help us." Jesus took him up, "'If thou canst . . .'! All things are possible to him that believeth." The hindrance did not lie with Jesus, but with the father's lack of faith. "Sir," he cried out with tears, "I do believe, help Thou mine unbelief." Still it seems Jesus hesitated, and it was not till He observed the growing numbers and increasing excitement of the crowd that He bade the unclean spirit come out of the boy, and never enter into him again. Then with cries and convulsions the evil spirit came out, leaving the boy apparently dead, but Jesus took him by the hand and raised him up, and he recovered.

When Jesus and His disciples were quiet together afterwards, they asked Him why they had failed in what they had been able to accomplish at other times. Jesus told them that such cures could only be wrought by prayer. The miraculous powers which He possessed Himself and imparted to His disciples, were no mere mechanical magic. They depended not only on the faith of those who were helped, but also on the spiritual condition of the healer, the intimacy of His fellowship with God.

W. H. BENNETT.