

THE THEOLOGICAL AND MYSTICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TRANSFIGURATION ACCORDING TO THE CHURCH FATHERS

• Michael Figura •

“Jesus’s Transfiguration is not illuminated
at first glance; its brilliance is grasped, rather,
through the entire mystery of Christ.”

1. Introduction

The Baptism in the Jordan, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, and the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper show an inner structure that holds together in the mystery of Jesus, Son of God and Son of Mary. The connection between the Lord’s Baptism and his Transfiguration is a particularly close one: the Baptism stands at the beginning of his public life, the Transfiguration at the beginning of his final journey to Jerusalem where he will suffer and die. For Luke, it is important to emphasize that both Baptism and Transfiguration take place while Jesus is praying (Lk 3:21, 9:29). At the Transfiguration, as at the Baptism, a heavenly voice speaks from the clouds and proclaims Jesus as the beloved or chosen Son on whom the Father’s favor rests.

Also like the Baptism, the Transfiguration, too, has been understood since patristic times as a revelation of the trinitarian God, the preparation for which was already mysteriously present in the Old Testament. In addition to the theological, we also find distinctly

anthropological statements in both mysteries, as Thomas Aquinas succinctly and masterfully sums up thus: The Baptism is the sacrament (i.e., the mystery and, at the same time, the visible sign) of man's first regeneration, the Transfiguration the sacrament of his second regeneration. The trinitarian God is at work in both, "for just as in baptism He confers innocence, signified by the simplicity of the dove, so in the resurrection will He give His elect the clarity of glory and refreshment (*refrigerium*) from all sorts of evil, which are signified by the bright cloud."¹ As the sacrament of the second regeneration, the Transfiguration is a prefiguration of man's divinization, which begins at baptism and binds man so closely to God that already in this life he partakes of the divine nature,² though this arrives at its fulfillment only at the resurrection of the dead.³

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1993/1997) sees in the Transfiguration a foretaste (*praegustatio*) of the future glory of the fully realized kingdom of God: "For a moment Jesus discloses his divine glory The Transfiguration gives us a foretaste of Christ's glorious coming, when he 'will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body' [Phil 3:21]. But it also recalls that 'it is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God'" (555f.).

2. A brief look at the synoptics' treatment of the Transfiguration

In the biblical accounts of the Transfiguration (Mt 17:1–9; Mk 9:2–10; Lk 9:28–36), the scene is first of all one of testimony from God, the law (Moses), and the prophets (Elijah) to Jesus as the Messiah, culminating in the directive, "listen to him." In addition, however, the biblical significance of the Transfiguration within the context of the other mysteries of Jesus also becomes clear: "The synoptic authors report the pericope of the Transfiguration with a unanimity that one also finds in the miracle accounts."⁴

¹*Summa theologiae* III, q. 45, a. 4, ad 2.

²See Friedrich Normann, *Teilhabe—ein Schlüsselwort der Vätertheologie* (Münster i.W., 1978).

³For a more detailed treatment, see Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Die Mysterien des Christentums* (= *Gesammelte Schriften* II) (Freiburg, 1941), 540–580: "Das Mysterium der Verklärung und der Letzten Dinge."

⁴Christian Schütz, *Die Mysterien des öffentlichen Lebens und Wirkens Jesu*, in

This unanimity takes the following form: Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem (Matthew and Mark), or is setting out on his final journey to the holy city (Luke). The scene of the Transfiguration in the synoptics follows Peter's confession of the Messiah at Caesarea Philippi (Luke does not specify the location), the first announcement of Jesus's Passion and Resurrection, and his call to follow in the way of the Cross. There is also an indication of time: it is six (Mt 17:1; Mk 9:2) or about eight (Lk 9:28) days afterward that Jesus takes Peter, James, and his brother John with him to the top of a high mountain. There the appearance of his face changes (*metamorphusthai* in Matthew and Mark; *heteron gignesthai* in Luke) and his clothes become a dazzling white. Moses and Elijah, i.e., the Law and the prophets, appear and converse with Jesus about his Exodus, which he will accomplish in Jerusalem on the Cross. The synoptics speak of the bright cloud, the voice from the clouds, and the command, "Listen to him!"

We find varying emphases in the synoptics' account of the Transfiguration, which could support the theory that Matthew and Luke "expanded, modified, and clarified as to details, but did not substantially change"⁵ Mark's original text. The synoptic authors see the scene on Tabor as an important sign on Jesus's road, one whose flash of glory does not signify an abrupt departure from his true humanity, but rather points ahead to the Resurrection.

For the evangelists, the Transfiguration scene is a highly important, unique moment in Jesus's life that emphasizes his divinity and grants his apostles a prefiguration of the glory of the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ, but does not detract from his humanity because his divine and human life is defined by the law of abasement and kenosis (cf. Phil 2:5–11).

Pope Benedict XVI treats the Transfiguration in the first volume of his book *Jesus of Nazareth*,⁶ in which he introduces a wider

Mysterium Salutis: Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik, ed. Johannes Feiner and Magnus Löhrer, vol. 3, no. 2: *Das Christuserignis* (Einsiedeln, 1969), 90. Also see Alois Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche*, vol. 1: *Von der apostolischen Zeit bis zum Konzil von Chalcedon* (451) (Freiburg, 1979), 174–177.

⁵Ibid., 91.

⁶Joseph Ratzinger–Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 305–318.

perspective: setting out from the heavenly directive on the mountain of the Transfiguration to listen to Jesus, he draws a connection to Moses's ascent of Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Torah, the ten commandments, as God's instructions for the way the people of God are to live according to the covenant. The Pope understands the Torah ultimately in terms of Jesus, who is, for Benedict, himself the Torah (316). The pericope of the Transfiguration is thus an invitation to recognize Jesus as the new Moses, and, in listening to him, to take God's words of instruction to heart and to follow them. The Pope also points to an additional, seldom noted phenomenon: Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him not only to the mountain of the Transfiguration, but also to the Mount of Olives at the hour of his agony (Mk 14:33). The Agony in the Garden thus becomes a counterimage of the Transfiguration (308). The new accents that Benedict in *Jesus of Nazareth* brings to bear on the tradition of the Transfiguration point to a truth that is often forgotten: the Transfiguration becomes the model of the spiritual experience that urges the believer onward, through asceticism and contemplation, to ascend to the mountain of God as a place of his particular nearness.

This theme was already present in the Church Fathers, for whom theology, spiritual experience, and mysticism were bound up together in the exegesis of the Transfiguration. We will look at two authors as exemplars of this patristic theology: Origen of Alexandria from the East and Hilary of Poitiers from the West.

3. *The Transfiguration in Origen's commentary on Matthew*

Origen treats the Transfiguration in his commentary on Matthew's gospel, which has come down to us only in fragments (Bk. XII, ch. 36–43). Origen's method of exegesis is clearly demonstrated in this commentary: he assigns a real significance to the literal sense of the text, which he also calls the historical or physical sense of Scripture. It is no accident that Origen is called a philologist.⁷ The literary sense is commonly the source and presup-

⁷Cf. Bernhard Neuschäfer, *Origenes als Philologe, Teil I: Text, Teil II: Anmerkungen* (*Schweizerische Beiträge zur Altertumswissenschaft* 18/1.2) (Basel, 1987).

position of the spiritual or allegorical sense, and Origen usually explains this literary sense of a biblical pericope first before moving on to its spiritual meaning.⁸ In his exegesis of the Transfiguration, Origen appears as both philologist and spiritual theologian, for whom this mystery, of which the apostles were eyewitnesses, becomes a model for the believer's ascent of Mount Tabor through asceticism and contemplation.

In his literary, spiritual, and mystical exegesis of the Transfiguration, Origen begins by considering what it means that "six days afterward" (that is, after Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah and Peter's designation as the rock upon whom the Church is built), Jesus takes Peter, James, and John to a high mountain and is transfigured before them. First he considers the number "six": for Origen, it is a significant reference because it recalls the Hexameron, the creation of the visible world in six days. It is the visible (*ta blepomena*) and temporal (*proskaira*) things that belong within this framework of the six days; the Transfiguration can be perceived only by those who are prepared to go beyond this framework to the invisible (*ta me blepomena*) and eternal (*aionia*) reality of God.

"If therefore any one of us wishes to be taken by Jesus, and led up by Him to the high mountain, and be deemed worthy of beholding His transfiguration (*metamorphosis*) apart (*kat'idian*), let him pass beyond the six days, because he no longer beholds the things which are seen, no longer loves the world, nor the things in the world, nor lusts after any worldly lust (*epithymia*), which is the lust of bodies, and of the riches of the body, and of the glory which is after the flesh, and whatever things whose nature it is to distract and drag away the soul from the things which are better and more divine, and bring it down and fix it fast to the deceit of this age, in wealth and glory, and the rest of the lusts which are the foes of truth" (ch. 36).

After establishing this fundamental spiritual meaning of the ascent of the mountain of the Transfiguration, Origen considers the details. He is quite aware that the reader of his commentary will have questions: when was Jesus transfigured (*metamorphote*) before those whom he had led to the high mountain, and was he seen (*ophthe*) by them in the form of God (*forma Dei*), which he had

⁸On Origen as an exegete, see Henri Crouzel, *Origène* (Collection, "Le Sycamore": Série "Chrétiens aujourd'hui," 15) (Paris, 1985), 91–120.

before his Incarnation? Did he retain the mere form of a servant (*forma servi*) for those disciples who remained below, while he divested himself of the form of a servant for those disciples he took with him, retaining for them only the form of God? Origen indicates that Matthew and Mark do not speak primarily of a general transfiguration of Jesus, but rather of Jesus's transfiguration *before* the three named disciples (*emprosthen auton/coram eis*) (ch. 37). This "necessary addition" found in the two gospels has a spiritual sense for Origen: "And according to this, indeed, you will say that it is possible for Jesus to be transfigured before some with this transfiguration, but before others at the same time not to be transfigured."

The question only becomes clear when we examine the conditions Origen considered essential for understanding the Transfiguration: it entails not lingering in the valleys of the spiritual life (*kato/deorsum*), where Jesus is known only "according to the flesh" (*kata sarka*, 2 Cor 6:16) and in the form of a servant, but instead ascending with the three chosen disciples "through works and words which are uplifting, to the lofty mountain of wisdom." There, on the spiritual mountain, Jesus will be recognized not only "according to the flesh," but as the Logos who is God (*theologoumenon/deus verbum*) and will be honored in the form of God. The Lord is transfigured for these, not for those who remain below.

Why does Jesus's face shine like the sun during the Transfiguration? Origen explains the mystery's significance for the disciples who were present, as well as for Christians throughout the ages: Jesus's face shines like the sun that it might be clearly seen (*phanerothe*) that Christians are to be children of the light (cf. Rom 13:12).

But it is not only Jesus himself who is transfigured before the three disciples; his garments, too, become as white as light (cf. Mt 17:2). For Origen, the garments of the transfigured Lord have multiple theological and spiritual meanings: on the one hand, they are the words and expressions of the gospels themselves, which point in a hidden way to the Transfiguration of Jesus in their parables and figures, and are thus a prefiguration of the destiny of all things as intended for transfiguration. The garments become blindingly white not only before the three disciples, but also before Moses, i.e., the Law, and Elijah, i.e., the prophets; for Origen, this shows the divinity of Jesus. Another important aspect of the scene for the Alexandrian theologian is that Jesus is transfigured while he is praying (ch. 39).

Origen then goes on to consider Peter's proposal in response to the mystery of the Transfiguration: "Lord, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths,' etc. And on this account these words call for very special examination, because Mark, in his own person, has added, 'For he knew not what to answer' (Mk 9:6), but Luke, 'not knowing what he spoke' (Lk 9:33)." When Peter speaks in this situation without knowing what he actually says, Origen sees it as a case of speaking in a "trance" (*kat'exstasin, per excessum mentis*). The concept of "ecstasy" emerges here. Throughout the history of religions, the term has meant an extraordinary experience of rapture. Mysticism from patristic times until the present has worked with an understanding of "ecstasy" as God's act of catching the soul up into a *unio mystica* with himself.⁹ This ecstasy is the fruit of a spirit who moves Peter to speak these words: but which spirit? Origen rules out the possibility of its being the Holy Spirit, based on the text in John's gospel that "as yet the Spirit had not been given (*eschekenaî*), because Jesus was not yet glorified" (Jn 7:39).

If not the Holy Spirit, the third divine person, what spirit was it, then, that led Peter to make pronouncements that exceeded his own horizon of understanding? Origen, in any case, sees Satan at work. Immediately following Peter's profession of faith in the Messiah, Jesus foretells his Passion and Resurrection for the first time, as we noted above. At that point, Peter wishes to anticipate Jesus and to show him a path that does not lead to the Cross. Jesus, however, stops him short with the harsh words, "Get behind me, Satan. You are a hindrance to me" (Mt 16:23). Origen notes that many readers of his commentary will not share his opinion in this, but will rather see it as a blasphemous attack on Peter, whom Jesus had only moments before called blessed (Mt 16:17). However, he says, those who believe that Peter and the other apostles were already perfected and freed from every foreign spirit before the Passion should explain how it was, then, that Christ saved them from the enemy and redeemed them through his "precious blood" (1 Pt 1:19), or why Peter and his two companions were "heavy with sleep" (Lk 9:32).

Satan is a hindrance to Jesus insofar as he wishes to divert him from his Passion, which will bring salvation to men. As the

⁹For a more detailed discussion, see Michael Figura, "Unio mystica," in *Wörterbuch der Mystik*, ed. Peter Dinzelbacher (Stuttgart, 1989), 503–506.

tempter, he wishes to lure Jesus away, under the pretext of an apparent good, from descending the mountain of the Transfiguration, from returning to men to take their death upon himself. He wishes Jesus to remain on the mountaintop with Moses and Elijah, and to settle down in the three booths Peter proposes to build. For Origen, it is Satan who speaks through Peter (who does not know what he is saying: *per eum, qui nesciebat quid loquebatur* [ch. 40]). The proposal of the three tents was in any case, in Origen's view, a wrongly motivated objection (to the Cross) from Peter: this is why the evangelists write that Peter did not know what he was saying.

While Peter is forbidden to build three tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah to live in as he suggests, God manifests a better and more glorious tent in the bright cloud. Just as God preceded his people in the pillar of cloud during the Israelites' time of wandering in the desert, so now the cloud overshadows, as a new tent, all who are on the mountain of the Transfiguration (ch. 42). The bright cloud is the "fatherly power" (*patrike dynamis/virtus paterna*), but Origen also sees the Holy Spirit in the cloud, and even, too, "our Savior," the beloved Son, on whom the Father's favor rests. The bright cloud, which is ultimately the presence of the glory of God, overshadows everything: the faithful disciples of Jesus (*tous Iesou gnesious methetas*), but also the Gospel (Jesus), the Law (Moses), and the prophets (Elijah). The light of Christ shines forth in the Gospel, but also in the law of the Old Testament. The voice from the cloud speaks to Moses and Elijah: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him" (Mt 17:5). For Origen, the deepest longings of the two great Old Testament figures are fulfilled on the mountain of the Transfiguration: both desire to see the Son of God and to hear him (ch. 42). Now they behold the glory of God in the radiant face of Jesus and in his shining garments.

The encounter with God also contains within it the encounter with a *mysterium fascinosum* and a *mysterium tremendum*.¹⁰ Origen also points to the distress and fear of the three disciples (ch. 43), a fear grounded in Exodus 33:20: "But you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." Blinded by the radiance of Jesus's face and by the splendor of the words spoken by the heavenly voice, the three disciples throw themselves to the ground, lowering themselves

¹⁰See the well-known book by Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (1917) (Munich, 1963).

as though unable to bear the radiance of the Logos “under God’s mighty hand” (1 Pt 5:6). For Origen, it is important to note that when the three dare to lift their gaze again, they see Jesus alone, without the other two (Mt 17:8). In Origen’s spiritual understanding of the Transfiguration pericope, this means that Moses (the Law) and Elijah (the prophets) have become one with the Gospel of Jesus (ch. 43). Jesus, as the new Moses and the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophets, is now the sole figure to whom the disciples should attend. Moses and Elijah, “having appeared in glory and talked with Jesus, went away to the place from which they had come.” The place from which they came and to which they returned is only briefly suggested by Origen: “perhaps to communicate the words which Jesus spoke to them, to those who had not yet found out about Jesus’s great deeds.” He also brings in here the mysterious reference in Matthew (27:52f.) to the many bodies of the holy ones who had fallen asleep, who rose at Jesus’s Resurrection, their tombs being opened, and went to Jerusalem to appear unto many.¹¹

After the mystery of the Transfiguration, Jesus instructs the disciples during their descent from Mount Tabor that they are not to speak of what has occurred to anyone, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead (Mt 17:9). For Origen, the reason for the injunction to silence is that Jesus does not wish his glory to be proclaimed before the glory of his Passion and Resurrection (ch. 43).

Other brief remarks and clarifications on the exegesis of the Transfiguration may be found in the catena fragments.

With his exegetical, theological, and spiritual exegesis of the Transfiguration, Origen calls Christians throughout the ages to a spiritual ascent and, at the same time, also to a spiritual descent: they must allow Jesus to lead them to the heights, there to encounter new spiritual experiences. For Origen, these spiritual experiences always lead to communion with Jesus Christ, and so to communion with the trinitarian God. The spiritual descent, then, for Origen, is ultimately that Jesus’s Transfiguration is not illuminated at first glance; its brilliance is grasped, rather, through the entire mystery of Christ, including the Passion and Resurrection.

¹¹Cf. Hermann Zeller, “Corpora Sanctorum,” in *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 71 (1949): 385–465 and the modification by Alois Winkelhofer, “Corpora Sanctorum,” in *Theologische Quartalschrift* 133 (1953): 30–67; 219–217.

4. *The Transfiguration in Hilary of Poitiers’
commentary on Matthew*

The commentary on Matthew is an early work by Bishop Hilary of Poitiers (c. 310–367), written between 353 and 356 before his exile to Asia Minor. It is the first, almost completely preserved Western commentary on Matthew (SC 254 [1978] and 258 [1979]).

“I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (Mt 16:28). The Bishop of Poitiers takes this verse as the framework for his commentary on the Transfiguration (*In Mt* 17,1–3 [SC 258, 60–65]).¹² The Transfiguration is an anticipation of the future, since the Son of Man shows himself on Mount Tabor as he will be at the coming of the Kingdom. Hilary recalls that Jesus will take the same three disciples before whom he is transfigured with him to the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:37): “Of course, one must remember that those whom he took with him were none other than those to whom the Son of Man in the Kingdom to come was shown, when on Mount Tabor, in the presence of Moses and Elijah, he was cloaked with the consummate dignity of his eternal glory. He took them with him on that occasion [at the Transfiguration] for the same reason that he took them with him now [at the Agony in the Garden]” (*In Mt* 31, 4). The inner unity between the Transfiguration and the Agony emerges, for Hilary, from the fact that the Transfiguration scene, as mentioned earlier, follows directly upon the first prediction of Jesus’s Passion and Resurrection, as well as his words regarding discipleship and self-denial. According to Hilary, the Transfiguration is a matter of strengthening the apostles’ hope in the Resurrection.

Hilary lays out the decisive theological and spiritual message of the Transfiguration pericope in Matthew: “The voice from the cloud declares that [Jesus] is the son, the beloved, on whom the Father’s favor rests, to whom they must listen, for he is a fit teacher of doing the things he has done, who has proven through his exemplary act that after the loss of the world, after the joy of the cross, after the death of the body, comes the glory of the heavenly

¹²Cf. Luis Ladaria, *La cristología de Hilario de Poitiers*, *Analecta Gregoriana* 255 (Rome, 1989), 123–129; Alfredo Fierro, *Sobre la Gloria en San Hilario*, *Analecta Gregoriana* 144 (Rome, 1964), 112–120.

kingdom from the resurrection of the dead” (*In Mt* 17, 3). Jesus raises up the disciples, who, filled with fear at the heavenly voice, have cast themselves to the ground; they perceive now only him, whom they previously saw standing between Moses and Elijah. The presence of the two great figures from the Old Testament on the mountain of the Transfiguration bears a double meaning for the Bishop of Poitiers: they are a projection of the future (*futuri forma*) and, at the same time, they confirm the authenticity (*facti fidem*) of the Transfiguration. Hilary, to whom Tertullian’s (c. 160–c. 225) work was well-known (cf. *In Mt* 5, 1), here seems to pick up the thought of the great theologian from North Africa: according to Tertullian, Jesus’s Transfiguration and the visible presence of Moses and Elijah are proofs of life after death (*De resurrectione mortuorum* 55:10). Moses appears in the image of the flesh of the resurrection, which he has not yet attained; Elijah in the truth of his body, which did not perish, since he was taken up to God without undergoing death (cf. 2 Kgs 2:1–18). The disciples’ testimony to the Transfiguration presupposes their inspiration by the Holy Spirit (*In Mt* 17, 3). Hilary also treats the Transfiguration in his larger work, *De Trinitate* (Bk. III, 16).

5. The spiritual message of the Transfiguration

The spiritual message of the Transfiguration is easily summed up: in patristic theology, the Transfiguration is an unfolding of the hymn in Paul’s letter to the Philippians (Phil 2:5–11). Here, Jesus’s kenosis in the Incarnation is already bound up in advance with his elevation to the right hand of the Father through his suffering and Cross and with his consecration as the Messiah. The Transfiguration is, for Jesus’s disciples and ultimately for all those who believe in God, a sign of our hope that we may participate in his glory. —Translated by Emily Rielley. □

MICHAEL FIGURA is a priest and theologian in the diocese of Bingen-Dietersheim, Germany.