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David Friedrich Strauss

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# THE LIFE OF JESUS.

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## CHAPTER X.

### THE TRANSFIGURATION OF JESUS, AND HIS LAST JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM.

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#### § 105.

##### THE TRANSFIGURATION OF JESUS CONSIDERED AS A MIRACULOUS EXTERNAL EVENT.

THE history of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain could not be ranged with the narratives of miracles which we have hitherto examined; not only because it relates to a miracle which took place *in* Jesus instead of a miracle performed *by* him; but also because it has the character of an epoch in the life of Jesus, which on the score of resemblance could only be associated with the baptism and resurrection. Hence Herder has correctly designated these three events as the three luminous points in the life of Jesus, which attest his heavenly mission<sup>1</sup>.

According to the impression produced by the first glance at the synoptical narrative (Matt. xvii. 1 ff.; Mark ix. 2 ff.; Luke ix. 28 ff.)—for the history is not found in the fourth gospel—

<sup>1</sup> Vom Erlöser der Menschen nach unsern drei ersten Evangelien, s. 114.

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PART II. CHAPTER X. § 105.

we have here a real, external, and miraculous event. Jesus, six or eight days after the first announcement of his passion, ascends a mountain with his three most confidential disciples, who are there witnesses how all at once his countenance, and even his clothes, are illuminated with supernatural splendour; how two venerable forms from the realm of spirits, Moses and Elias, appear talking with him; and lastly, how a heavenly voice, out of a bright cloud, declares Jesus to be the Son of God, to whom they are to give ear.

These few points in the history give rise to a multitude of questions, by the collection of which Gabler has done a meritorious service<sup>2</sup>. In relation to each of the three phases of the event—the light, the apparition of the dead, and the voice—both its possibility, and the adequacy of its object, may be the subject of question. First, whence came the extraordinary light with which Jesus was invested? Let it be remembered that a *metamorphosis* of Jesus is spoken of (*μεταμορφώθη ἑμπεροσθεν αὐτῶν*): now this would appear to imply, not a mere illumination from without, but an irradiation from within, a transient effulgence, so to speak, of the beams of the divine glory through the veil of humanity. Thus Olshausen regards this event as an important crisis in the process of purification and glorification, through which he supposes the corporeality of Jesus to have passed, during his whole life up to the time of his ascension<sup>3</sup>. But without here dilating further on our previous arguments, that either Jesus was no real man, or the purification which he underwent during his life, must have consisted in something else than the illumination and subtilization of his body; it is in no case to be conceived how his clothes, as well as his body, could participate in such a process of transfiguration. If, on this account, it be rather preferred to suppose an illumination from without, this would not be a metamorphosis, which however is the term used by the evangelists:

<sup>2</sup> In a treatise on the history of the Transfiguration, in his *neuesten theol. Journal*, 1. Bd. 5. Stück, s. 517 ff. Comp. Bauer, *hebr. Mythol.* 2, s. 233 ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Bibl. Comm.* 1, s. 534 f.

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so that no consistent conception can be formed of this scene, unless indeed we choose, with Olshausen, to include both modes, and think of Jesus as both radiating, and irradiated. But even supposing this illumination possible, there still remains the question, what purpose could it serve? The answer which most immediately suggests itself is: to glorify Jesus; but compared with the spiritual glory which Jesus created for himself by word and deed, this physical glorification, consisting in the investing of his body with a brilliant light, must appear very insignificant, nay, almost childish. If it be said that, nevertheless, such a mode of glorifying Jesus was necessary for the maintenance of weak faith: we reply that in that case, it must have been effected in the presence of the multitude, or at least before the entire circle of the disciples, not surely before just the select three who were spiritually the strongest; still less would these few eye-witnesses have been prohibited from communicating the event precisely during the most critical period, namely, until after the resurrection.—These two questions apply with enhanced force to the second feature in our history, the apparition of the two dead men. Can departed souls become visible to the living? and if, as it appears, the two men of God presented themselves in their former bodies, only transfigured, whence had they these—according to biblical ideas—before the universal resurrection? Certainly in relation to Elijah, who went up to heaven without laying aside his body, this difficulty is not so great; Moses, however, died, and his corpse was buried. But further, to what end are we to suppose that these two illustrious dead appeared? The evangelical narrative, by representing the forms as *talking with Jesus*, συλλαλῶντες τῷ Ἰ., seems to place the object of their appearance in Jesus; and if Luke be correct, it had reference more immediately to the approaching sufferings and death of Jesus. But they could not have made the first announcement of these events to him, for, according to the unanimous testimony of the synoptists, he had himself predicted them a week before (Matt. xvi. 21 parall.). Hence it is conjectured, that Moses and Elias only informed

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Jesus more minutely, concerning the particular circumstances and conditions of his death<sup>4</sup>: but, on the one hand, it is not accordant with the position which the gospels assign to Jesus in relation to the ancient prophets, that he should have needed instruction from them; and on the other hand, Jesus had already foretold his passion so circumstantially, that the more special revelations from the world of spirits could only have referred to the particulars of his being delivered to the Gentiles, and the spitting in his face, of which he does not speak till a subsequent occasion (Matt. xx. 19; Mark x. 34.). If, however, it be suggested, that the communication to be made to Jesus consisted not so much in information, as in the conferring of strength for his approaching sufferings: we submit that at this period there is not yet any trace of a state of mind in Jesus, which might seem to demand assistance of this kind; while for his later sufferings this early strengthening did not suffice, as is evident from the fact, that in Gethsemane a new impartation is necessary. Thus we are driven, though already in opposition to the text, to try whether we cannot give the appearance a relation to the disciples; but first, the object of strengthening faith is too general to be the motive of so special a dispensation; secondly, Jesus, in the parable of the rich man, must on this supposition have falsely expounded the principle of the divine government in this respect, for he there says that he who will not hear the writings of Moses and the prophets,—and how much more he who will not hear the present Christ?—would not be brought to believe, though one should return to him from the dead: whence it must be inferred that such an apparition, at least to that end, is not permitted by God. The more special object, of convincing the disciples that the doctrine and fate of Jesus were in accordance with Moses and the prophets, had been already partly attained; and it was not completely attained until after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the outpouring of the Spirit: the transfiguration not having formed

<sup>4</sup> Olshausen, *ut sup.* s. 537.

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any epoch in their enlightenment on this subject.—Lastly, the voice out of the bright cloud (without doubt the *Shechinah*) is, like that at the baptism, a divine voice: but what an anthropomorphic conception of the Divine Being must that be, which admits the possibility of real, audible speech on his part! Or if it be said, that a communication of God to the spiritual ear, is alone spoken of here<sup>5</sup>, the scene of the transfiguration is reduced to a vision, and we are suddenly transported to a totally different point of view.

## § 106.

## THE NATURAL EXPLANATION OF THE NARRATIVE IN VARIOUS FORMS.

It has been sought to escape from the difficulties of the opinion which regards the transfiguration of Jesus as not only a miraculous, but also an external event, by confining the entire incident to the internal experience of the parties concerned. In adopting this position, the miraculous is not at once relinquished; it is only transferred to the internal workings of the human mind, as being thus more simple and conceivable. Accordingly it is supposed, that by divine influence the spiritual nature of the three apostles, and probably also of Jesus himself, was exalted to a state of ecstasy, in which they either actually entered into intercourse with the higher world, or were able to shadow forth its forms to themselves in the most vivid manner; that is, the event is regarded as a vision<sup>1</sup>. But the chief support of this interpretation, namely, that Matthew himself, by the expression *ὄραμα*, *vision* (v. 9), describes the event as merely subjective and visionary, gives way so soon as it is remembered, that neither is there any thing in the signification of the word *ὄραμα* which determines it to refer to what is merely

<sup>5</sup> Olshansen, 1, s. 539; comp. s. 178.

<sup>1</sup> Thus Tertull. adv. Marcion, iv. 22; Herder, ut sup. 115 f., with whom also Gratz agrees. Comm. z. Matth. 2, s. 163 f. 169.

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mental, nor is it exclusively so applied even in the phraseology of the New Testament, for we also find it, as in Acts vii. 31., used to denote something perceived externally<sup>2</sup>. As regards the fact itself, it is improbable, and at least without scriptural precedent, that several persons, as, here, three or four, should have had the same very complex vision<sup>3</sup>; to which it may be added, that on this view of the subject also, the whole difficult question recurs concerning the utility of such a miraculous dispensation.

To avoid the above difficulty, others, still confining the event to the internal experience of the parties, regard it as the product of a natural activity of soul, and thus explain the whole as a dream<sup>4</sup>. During or after a prayer offered by Jesus, or by themselves, in which mention was made of Moses and Elias, and their advent as messianic forerunners desired, the three disciples, according to this interpretation, slept, and (the two names mentioned by Jesus yet sounding in their ears,) dreamed that Moses and Elias were present, and that Jesus conversed with them: an illusion which continued during the first confused moments after their awaking. As the former explanation rests on the *ὄραμα* of Matthew, so it is alleged in support of this, that Luke describes the disciples as *heavy with sleep*, *βε βαρημένοι ὕπνῳ*, and only towards the end of the scene as *fully awake*, *διαγρηγορήσαντες* (v. 32). The hold which the third evangelist here presents to the natural explanation, has been made a reason for assigning to his narrative an important superiority over that of the two other evangelists; recent critics pronouncing that by this and other particulars, which bring the event nearer to natural possibility, the account in Luke evinces itself to be the original, while that of Matthew, by its omission of those particulars, is proved to be the traditionary one, since

<sup>2</sup> Comp. Fritzsche, in Matth. p. 552; Olshausen, 1, s. 523.

<sup>3</sup> Olshausen, ut sup.

<sup>4</sup> Rau, symbola ad illustrandam Evv. de metamorphosi J. Chr. narrationem; Gabler, ut sup. s. 539 ff.; Kuinöl, Comm. z. Matth. p. 459 ff.; Neander, L. J. Chr. s. 474 f.

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with the eagerness for the miraculous which characterized that age, no one would fabricate particulars calculated to diminish the miracle, as is the case with the sleepiness of the disciples<sup>5</sup>. This mode of conclusion we also should be obliged to adopt, if in reality the above features could only be understood in the spirit of the natural interpretation. But we have only to recollect how in another scene, wherein the sufferings, which according to Luke were announced at the transfiguration, began to be accomplished, and wherein, according to the same evangelist, Jesus likewise held communication with a heavenly apparition, namely, in Gethsemane, the disciples, in all the synoptical gospels, again appear *asleep καθεύδοντες* (Matt. xxvi. 40 parall.). If it be admitted, that the merely external, formal resemblance of the two scenes, might cause a narrator to convey the trait of the slumber into the history of the transfiguration, there is a yet stronger probability that the internal import of the trait might appear to him appropriate to this occasion also, for the sleeping of the disciples at the very moment when their master was going through his most critical experience, exhibits their infinite distance from him, their inability to attain his exalted level; the prophet, the recipient of a revelation, is among ordinary men like a watcher among the sleeping: hence it followed of course, that as in the deepest suffering, so here also in the highest glorification of Jesus, the disciples should be represented as heavy with sleep. Thus this particular, so far from furnishing aid to the natural explanation, is rather intended by a contrast to heighten the miracle which took place in Jesus. We are, therefore, no longer warranted in regarding the narrative in Luke as the original one, and in building an explanation of the event on his statement; on the contrary, we consider that addition, in connexion with the one already mentioned (v. 31), a sign that his account is a traditionary and

<sup>5</sup> Schulz, über das Abendmahl, s. 319; Schleiermacher, über den Lukas, s. 148 f.; comp. also Köster, Immanuel, s. 60 f.

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embellished one<sup>6</sup>, and must rather adhere to that of the two other evangelists.

Not only, however, does the interpretation which sees in the transfiguration only a natural dream of the apostles, fail as to its main support, but it has besides a multitude of internal difficulties. It presupposes only the three disciples to have been dreaming, leaving Jesus awake, and thus not included in the illusion. But the whole tenor of the evangelical narrative implies that Jesus as well as the disciples saw the appearance; and what is still more decisive, had the whole been a mere dream of the disciples, he could not afterwards have said to them: *Tell the vision to no man*, since by these words he must have confirmed in them the belief that they had witnessed something special and miraculous. Supposing however that Jesus had no share in the dream, it still remains altogether unexampled, that three persons should in a natural manner have had the same dream at the same time. This the friends of the above interpretation have perceived, and hence have supposed that the ardent Peter, who indeed is the only speaker, alone had the dream, but that the narrators, by a synecdoche, attributed to all the disciples what in fact happened only to one. But from the circumstance that Peter here, as well as elsewhere, is the spokesman, it does not follow that he alone had the vision, and the contrary can by no figure of speech be removed from the clear words of the evangelists. But the explanation in question still more plainly betrays its inadequacy. Not only does it require, as already noticed, that the audible utterance of the name of Moses and Elias on the part of Jesus, should be blended with the dream of the disciples; but it also calls in the aid of a storm, which by its flashes of lightning is supposed to have given rise in them to the idea of supernatural splendour, by its peals of thunder, to that of conversation and heavenly voices, and to have held them

<sup>6</sup> Bauer has discerned this, ut sup. s. 237; Fritzsche, p. 556; De Wette, exeg. Handb. 1, 2, s. 56 f.; Weisse, die evang. Gesch. 1, s. 536; and Paulus also partly, exeg. Handb. 2, s. 447 f.



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in this delusion even for some time after they awaked. But, according to Luke, it was on the waking of the disciples (*διαγρηγορήσαντες δὲ εἶδον κ. τ. λ.*) that they saw the two men standing by Jesus: this does not look like a mere illusion protracted from a dream into waking moments; hence Kuinöl introduces the farther supposition, that, while the disciples slept, there came to Jesus two unknown men, whom they, in awaking, connected with their dream, and mistook for Moses and Elias. By giving this turn to the circumstances, all those occurrences which on the interpretation based on the supposition of a dream, should be regarded as mere mental conceptions, are again made external realities: for the idea of supernatural brilliancy is supposed to have been produced by a flash of lightning, the idea of voices, by thunder, and lastly, the idea of two persons in company with Jesus, by the actual presence of two unknown individuals. All this the disciples could properly perceive only when they were awake; and hence the supposition of a dream falls to the ground as superfluous.

Therefore, since this interpretation, by still retaining a thread of connexion between the alleged character of the event and a mental condition, has the peculiar difficulty of making three partake in the same dream, it is better entirely to break this thread, and restore all to the external world: so that we now have a natural external occurrence before us, as in the first instance we had a supernatural one. Something objective presented itself to the disciples; thus it is explained how it could be perceived by several at once: they deceived themselves when awake as to what they saw; this was natural, because they were all born within the same circle of ideas, were in the same frame of mind, and in the same situation. According to this opinion, the essential fact in the scene on the mountain, is a secret interview which Jesus had preconcerted, and with a view to which he took with him the three most confidential of his disciples. Who the two men were with whom Jesus held this interview, Paulus does not venture to determine; Kuinöl conjectures that they were secret adherents of the same kind as Nicodemus; according to Venturini,

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they were Essenes, secret allies of Jesus. Before these were arrived, Jesus prayed, and the disciples, not being invited to join, slept; for the sleep noticed by Luke, though it were dreamless, is gladly retained in this interpretation, since a delusion appears more probable in the case of persons just awaking. On hearing strange voices talking with Jesus, they awake, see Jesus, who probably stood on a higher point of the mountain than they, enveloped in unwonted brilliancy, proceeding from the first rays of morning, which, perhaps reflected from a sheet of snow, fell on Jesus, but were mistaken by them in the surprise of the moment for a supernatural illumination; they perceive the two men, whom, for some unknown reasons, the drowsy Peter, and after him the rest, take for Moses and Elias; their astonishment increases when they see the two unknown individuals disappear in a bright morning cloud, which descends as they are in the act of departing, and hear one of them pronounce out of the cloud the words: οὗτος ἐστὶν κ. τ. λ., which they under these circumstances unavoidably regard as a voice from heaven<sup>7</sup>. This explanation, which even Schleiermacher is inclined to favour<sup>8</sup>, is supposed, like the former, to find a special support in Luke, because in this evangelist the assertion that the two men are Moses and Elias, is much less confidently expressed than in Matthew and Mark, and more as a mere notion of the drowsy Peter. For while the two first evangelists directly say: ἄφθισαν αὐτοῖς Μωσῆς καὶ Ἠλίας (*there appeared unto them Moses and Elias*), Luke more warily, as it seems, speaks of ἄνδρες δύο, οἵτινες ἦσαν Μωσῆς καὶ Ἠλίας (*two men, who were Moses and Elias*), the first designation being held to contain the objective fact, the second its subjective interpretation. But this interpretation is obviously approved by the narrator, from his choice of the word οἵτινες ἦσαν, instead of ἔδοξαν εἶναι; that he first speaks of *two men*, and afterwards gives them their names, cannot have been to leave another interpretation open to the reader, but only to imitate the mysterious-

<sup>7</sup> Paulus, exeg. Handb., 2, 436 ff.; L. J. 1, b. s. 7 ff.; Natürliche Geschichte, 3, s. 256 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Ut sup.