CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX
THE ORIGIN AND HISTORY
OF THE TRANSFIGURATION STORY

[39] The story of the transfiguration is found in the Synoptics (Mark 9:2-10; Matt 17:19; Luke 9:28-36) in forms so similar that their dependence on a common source is virtually certain. The source was a text almost identical with that of Mark, since both Matthew and Luke have corrected it in their characteristic ways, while Mark shows no knowledge of the corrections of either.¹

The priority of Mark to Matthew and Luke does not prove that the Markan form and interpretation of the story were the original ones. Caution is dictated by the fact that the story circulated in other forms. We find in 2 Peter 1:16ff. a reference to it that knows nothing of Peter's speech and the cloud, nor of Elijah and Moses and their miraculous disappearance. Luke, too, seems to have known another version beside Mark's. Where else did he get the apostles' sleep (9:32), the departure of Moses and Elijah before Peter's speech (9:33)—incompatible with Peter's following proposal to make tabernacles for them and with their yet later disappearance (9:33, 36)?

Since Mark was using a story that circulated in several forms, we have to ask whether or not he interpreted it correctly. He understood it as a confirmation of Peter's pronouncement at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus was "the Messiah" (Mark 8:29). He had used Peter's pronouncement to introduce several sayings by Jesus, but immediately

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¹ Specifically: In 9:2 Mark is pleonastic, "privately alone"; Matthew omitted "alone." Luke omitted both. In 9:3 Mark is vulgar, Jesus's clothes glittered "like a washerman on earth cannot whiten so"; both Matthew and Luke omitted this, and both added, but in different words, a statement that his face was also transfigured—both wanted him to equal Moses. In 9:4 Mark, for the sixth time in succession, begins a sentence with kai—"And they were talking"; both Matthew and Luke changed the sentence structure, and Luke added an explanation of what was being said. In 9:5 Mark again started with kai; both Matthew and Luke again changed the construction. Mark let Peter call Jesus "Rabbi"; Matthew changed the title to "Lord," Luke to "Master." Still in 9:5, Peter's speech is non-sequential—"It is good for us to be here. And let us make three tabernacles"; Matthew tried to blur the break by inserting, "If you wish." Mark himself apologized for Peter by adding 9:6, "For he did not know what he could say, for they were terrified." Matthew omitted this unedifying picture of the apostle; Luke omitted the last clause, but altered the first to excuse Peter's words as an omen, "Not knowing [the providential significance] of what he says." In 9:7 Mark again begins with kai followed by a verb; both Matthew and Luke replaced this by more elegant genitive absolutes, again differently worded. All these changes show independent improvement by Matthew and Luke of a common Markan text; only critics who cannot recognize bad Greek or embarrassing material will fail to understand why Matthew and Luke independently corrected the same places.
after those he went on to the transfiguration story and tied it to the pronouncement story by a time reference (9:2, "And six days after [this discussion]...""). What Peter had conjectured and Jesus (according to Mark) had claimed is now confirmed by the voice from the cloud.

Fortunately, Mark was not a critical student of *Traditionsgeschichte*. He had collected stories and sayings of Jesus from many sources; he put them together with ecumenical indifference to their different terminologies, which reflected the different notions of Jesus held by the different Christian circles whence they had come. Thus to Peter’s pronouncement that Jesus was “the Messiah” he made Jesus assent by implication (8:30), but then go on to speak of himself as “the Son of Man.” For our purposes, whether or not the “Son of Man” sayings originally referred to Jesus is irrelevant; here, the point is that the compiler of Mark understood them, and intended them to be understood, as referring to Jesus, and therefore attached them to Peter’s pronouncement as explanations of its import, neglecting the difference of the terms used. Yet more, to confirm both Peter’s and Jesus’s sayings, he went on to report that the voice from the cloud (God’s, of course) declared Jesus “My Son” (9:7), and he made Jesus comment on this by another reference to “the Son of Man” (9:9). For Mark “Messiah,” “Son of God,” and “Son of Man” were all titles of Jesus and therefore practically equivalent; he makes this clear by equating them in his great trial scene. The High Priest asks, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed” [God]? Jesus replies, “I am; and you shall see the Son of Man [me] sitting at the right hand of the Power” (of God—14:61f.). Such editorial equation must not be allowed to conceal from us the different meanings that the terms originally had, as revealed by the different, older, pre-editorial contexts in which they occur. [40]

“The Son,” our present concern, is a figure originally at home in miracle stories, where he has nothing to do with either a suffering Son of Man or a triumphant Messiah. Specifically, his native habitat in Mark is:

1:11, the voice from heaven at the baptism, “You are my beloved Son”
3:11, the demoniacs cry out, “You are the Son of God”
5:7, another demoniac calls him “Jesus, Son of the Highest God”
9:7, the voice from heaven at the transfiguration, “You are my beloved Son”
15:39, the centurion at the cross, seeing Jesus’s miraculous death, says, “Truly this man was Son of God.”

(With these passages may perhaps belong Jesus’s statement in his apocalyptic prophecy, 13:32, that neither the angels “nor the Son” know the date of the End. This shares the notion of “the Son” as a heavenly being, but is so loosely connected with the context that it