THE MOUNTAIN OF TRANSFIGURATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND IN LATER TRADITION

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*Et post dies sex assumpti Petrum, Iacobum et Ioannem fratrem eius, et duxit illos ad montem Thabor excelsum, ut orarent, “And after six days he took with him Peter, James and John his brother, and led them up the high mountain Tabor to pray.” With these words Peter Comestor, in his *Historia Scholastica*, which he composed during the last years before his death in 1178/9, introduced the discussion of Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountain. The sentence combines the opening sentences of the accounts in Matt 17:1–9 and Luke 9:28–36. There is, however, one foreign element, and that is the name “Tabor” given to the mountain. In the Synoptic Gospels the mountain has no name, and although in Peter Comestor’s time it was universally known as Tabor, it took quite some time before that name found acceptance. In this essay we will study how the mountain was described before its identification with Mount Tabor, then trace the origin and history of that identification and, finally, discuss whether it can stand the test of criticism.*

1. “The Mountain”

Our first task, then, is a review of the early Christian texts describing the Mount of Transfiguration. However, to carry this out with the required clarity, it seems advisable to begin with some linguistic groundwork, the reason for which will soon become clear. What we will say about the definite article is not exclusively valid for Greek, but also applicable to

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other languages having this part of speech. Nevertheless, for the sake of brevity, we will restrict ourselves to Greek. In our examples we will include passages with ὄρος, “mountain,” which is the essential word in our inquiry.

Our observations have to do with the use or non-use of the definite article preceding the noun at its first introduction into a text. Four categories of such occurrences may be distinguished:

(1) First mention. When an object is mentioned for the first time, it is normally unknown and therefore lacks the definite article. Once it has been introduced, it is known and has one. Thus, “book” in Luke 4:17 ἐπεδοθή αὐτῷ βιβλίον … καὶ ἀναπτύξας τὸ βιβλίον εὗρεν is initially a book, but on referring back the book. Similarly, in Mark 9:2 ἀναφέρει αὐτούς εἰς ὄρος ύψηλόν, “mountain,” not mentioned before, has no article, but in v. 9 καταβαινόντων αὐτῶν ἐκ τοῦ ὄρους the same mountain, already introduced, has one.

However, there are cases where an object on its first mention does have the definite article. Three cases are relevant here:

(2) The object is introduced with an adjunct of some sort, for example, a relative clause, Matt 2:16 κατὰ τὸν χρόνον ὅν ἠφίξισαν παρὰ τῶν μάγων; Luke 4:29 ἦγαγον αὐτὸν ἐκ τοῦ ὄρους ἐφ’ οὖ ἡ πόλις ἡκοδόμητο αὐτῶν. The objects, χρόνος and ὄρος respectively, are not known before but are made known here through the adjunct. There are many other types of adjuncts, for instance a prepositional group inserted between the article and the noun: Acts 9:19 ἐγένετο δὲ μετὰ τῶν ἐν Δαμασκῷ μαθητῶν. In this passage the disciples would be unknown without the localizing adjunct.

(3) The object is knowable from the context, for example, ἡ χείρ in Acts 26:1 τότε ὁ Παύλος ἐκτείνας τὴν χείρα ἀπέλογείτο, where of course the hand of the subject of the sentence is meant, or Acts 9:2 ἦτοι ἄνω τινῶν ἐπιστολάς εἰς Δαμασκὸν πρὸς τὰς συναγωγὰς, where the synagogues to be found there are meant. In these cases it is possible to rewrite the sentence so as to make them belong to category (2): τότε ὁ Παύλος ἐκτείνας τὴν χείρα αὐτοῦ ἀπέλογείτο καὶ ἦτοι ἄνω τινῶν ἐπιστολάς εἰς τὰς ἐν Δαμασκῷ συναγωγὰς. An example with ὄρος is found in Mark 5:11 ἦν δὲ ἐκεῖ πρὸς τῷ ὄρει ἄγελη χοίρων μεγάλη βοσκομένη. Here, the rephrasing might run ἦν δὲ πρὸς τῷ ἐκεῖ ὄρει ἄγελη χοίρων μεγάλη βοσκομένη.