

## LIGHT IN THE CLAY

### *A Meditation on the Transfiguration*

An extract from Chapter 20, Vol. 4 of Sr Anne Eason's work, *The Passion of the Image*. You are free to quote from it, but please acknowledge.



*The Transfiguration Secco for Lancaster University Catholic Chaplaincy*

From an article by Aidan Hart on April 4, 2017 in the *Orthodox Arts Journal*.

Guerric of Igny uses the phrase which is in italics, in his homilies of that Light which illuminates all life, as John also has it in his Prologue: this '*brightness of eternal light in the clay vessel of your flesh*' is what was seen at the Transfiguration, and I select an aspect of it for exploration in the context of the *Word became Flesh*. The Transfiguration, this One in whom was Life which is the Light of men, is the spiritual illumination of all that exists, the Shekinah in the interior depths of all that is. Bulgakov would say that in the Transfiguration, the Shekhina entered the created world, and in that sense divine beauty was no longer hidden, but visible and knowable, and abiding. Louis Bouyer says when writing of monasticism "... as St John hints in his Prologue, the Shekinah is established for the future in the human nature of the Saviour.... .."<sup>1</sup> The Liturgy for Lent 2 has the Transfiguration Gospel account as its focus and the accompanying Vigils lesson which acts as a commentary upon it reads: "Christ is not divided in any way. He is believed to be One, Unique and true Son by all who adore Him. ... *the image of the invisible God, the splendour of the glory of the Father's substance, the imprint of His essence* ... Would it be right, therefore, to doubt that there is one, unique, true Son, the Word from God the Father, *with flesh united to Himself*..."<sup>2</sup> The Liturgy does not only express the phenomenon of the Shekinah in the Transfiguration but also the unique and undivided oneness of Christ. Why this emphasis upon the Oneness in the Liturgy of the Transfiguration Gospel?

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Bouyer: *The Meaning of Monastic Life*, Light Inaccessible, pp. 69 and 70

<sup>2</sup> A reading from *St Cyril of Alexandria's Dialogue: Christ is One* as used in *Lectionnaire Monastique*

I am primarily discussing John's Gospel, but the Transfiguration account of the Synoptics expresses what John terms the *Light coming into the world*. Essential to John's Prologue is that Christ is the One, the Only Begotten off the Father. John devotes an entire chapter on the eve of the Passion to the nature of this Oneness, so essential to His Gospel as it is.<sup>3</sup> This chapter winds round and round the אֶחָד (ekh-awd) in Hebrew, and ܐܚܕ (KhaD) in Aramaic of Chapter 17 of his Gospel which is at the Passion's threshold, drawing His disciples through his Incarnation into this essential Oneness. It is clear to me that both John and the Synoptic Evangelists made the profoundest Christological associations between the Light of Christ and His Oneness. Cyril of Alexander on the Transfiguration, and Augustine commenting on the Light as depicted in the Prologue to John's Gospel evidence this. "... Christ the Lord is called Light coming from the Light. This Light which does not come forth from another Light, and that Light which is co-equal with Him but which does come from the Light, *together form but one Light, and not two Lights*. If we have understood this, thanks be to God!"<sup>4</sup>

I am working on the Aramaic text of St John's Gospel and likewise with the Synoptic Aramaic texts of the Transfiguration. It is now accepted that Aramaic source texts were most likely used for portions of the New Testament text, especially the Gospels and I have footnoted some references to this.<sup>5</sup> I stress this because in examining the texts of the Synoptic accounts of the Transfiguration, it is noteworthy that they all state they saw *only* Our Lord after Moses and Elijah were withdrawn, or they saw Jesus *alone*. In John's Gospel Jesus seen 'alone' will be the revelation of the Father as it was so tenderly pointed out by Him to Philip who asked Him to show them the Father. In John's Gospel Jesus is the Only Begotten of the Father, and the Son *alone* knows the Father, and Our Lord explicitly says: 'I and the Father are One'. It is a point of recognition and identity which might also include the Transfiguration of the Synoptics. The Liturgy for the Second Sunday of Lent has the Transfiguration preceded by Genesis 15 text and it contrasts the division and darkness characterising Abraham's sacrifice followed by its covenant, with the light and unity characterising the Transfiguration which will be followed by a new covenant. In the Liturgy for the Lent 2 the Vigils lesson emphasises the oneness of Christ in the Theophany of the Transfiguration. Is it possible that Luke, who is like John in some key Christological themes, is suggesting a leitmotif between 'alone/only' and 'one'?

Matthew in Aramaic has the word ܒܠܬܝܠܐܝܢܐ (B'aLKHuOD,aOH\_Y)<sup>6</sup> ... and they lifted up their eyes and did not see anyone except Jesus *alone*..." In the Aramaic account of the

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<sup>3</sup> John 17 and 10.30.

<sup>4</sup> From Saint Augustine's commentary on St. John's Gospel as used in *Lectionnaire Monastique*.

<sup>5</sup> Some of the early Church Fathers, eg Jerome, believed that Matthew's Gospel was originally written in Aramaic or Hebrew. Fifty years earlier Papias, c. A.D. 120 Bishop of Hieropolis in Asia Minor, wrote, "Matthew compiled the sayings in the Aramaic language, and everyone translated them as well as he could" (*Explanation of the Sayings of the Lord* [cited by Eusebius in *History of the Church* 3:39]). Eusebius himself declared that "Matthew had begun by preaching to the Hebrews, and when he made up his mind to go to others too, he committed his own Gospel to writing in his native tongue [Aramaic], so that for those with whom he was no longer present the gap left by his departure was filled by what he wrote" (*History of the Church* 3:24 [inter 300-325]). Claude Tresmontant philosopher and outstanding Biblical exegete made a strong case for the Hebrew and Aramaic origin of the Gospels.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 17.8

Transfiguration by Luke the final verse says: ‘and Jesus was found alone **לone** (B'aLKHuOD,aOH\_Y)...’<sup>7</sup> The Apostles have just witnessed the ‘eternal light in the clay’, the reality of the Word, the Son of God Incarnate, who had become Flesh and they had fallen on their faces before the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*<sup>8</sup> and rendered worship. They will also witness not long after, the sweat and blood streaming from this Flesh in the agony of Gethsemane when in His anguished humanity He fell on His face and cried to His Father. Earlier in his Gospel in Luke 4.8<sup>9</sup> he has: ‘To the Lord thy God thou shalt do homage, and to Him *alone* **לone** (B'aLKHuOD,aOH\_Y) shalt thou render worship.’ Luke has a nuanced reference here to Deuteronomy 6.13. Luke also uses this word in 9.18 when Our Lord is praying *alone* **לone** (B'aLKHuOD,aOH\_Y) before He puts the question to the disciples: ‘Who do men say that I am...’. In addition, at the onset of the Passion, Christ says to His disciples: ‘You will all flee and leave me *alone*, but I am not *alone*, my Father is always with me...’<sup>10</sup> John expresses this element of *being alone* as being at the essence of the Passion of the Son. It is clear to me that the Evangelists recording the Transfiguration are making a reference to the Passion for which the Transfiguration is a preparation, both for Christ and for His disciples. They (Moses and Elijah) were discussing with Him His pending ‘departure’, ‘exodus’ which they knew was His Passion. At this point I repeat that the early Fathers when teaching on the Transfiguration, did so in terms of the Oneness of Christ. There has to be an acknowledgement of this recognition, that He and the Father are *One*. This is surely the recognition needed of the Incarnation, the Word made Flesh, the Light in the world which enlightens every man and gives life. This is “... the power of the Lord’s Transfiguration which revealed to men ‘the ever-abiding light’ of God... which penetrated into the world and abides in it...”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 9.36

<sup>8</sup> A concept of the numinous from Rudolf Otto’s seminal work, *The Idea of the Holy*.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 4.1 ff. The temptation in the wilderness.

<sup>10</sup> John 16.32

<sup>11</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, *A Bulgakov Anthology*: Edited by James Pain and Nicolas Zernov, London, SPCK, 1976, p. 190.