Transfiguration, Beauty and Biblical Interpretation

Zoltán Dörnyei

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Summary

The overarching theme of this dissertation is the nature of biblical interpretation. The material consists of three parts that build on each other. The first chapter is centred around the Synoptic descriptions of the Transfiguration and the various allusions to the event elsewhere in the Bible. The key question addressed is why (post-patristic) Western Christianity has been unable to properly engage with the rich content of this biblical episode, in contrast to the Eastern Church, which has always held the Transfiguration in high esteem.

The second chapter draws a parallel between the theological treatment of the Transfiguration and that of divine beauty, with key topics including the relationship between beauty, light, glory, truth and goodness; the perception of the canon as an artistic composition with a narrative framework; and the loss of some aspects of beauty in the theology, liturgy and sacred art of the Western church.

The final chapter addresses the question of biblical interpretation and relates this topic to the material of the previous two chapters in three ways: first, through focusing on the biblical conception of “seeing” as it complements “hearing” God’s word; second, through considering the interpretational implications of viewing Scripture as a multi-layered composition of divine art; finally, through examining the conditions and prerequisites that are necessary for the interpreter to be able to behold the beauty of God’s glory as conveyed through Scripture.

The Conclusion offers an extended analogy between stained glass windows and Scripture to illustrate the complex operation of biblical texts by describing how stained glass windows produce their overall effect in a church environment.

Figure 1. Variation on the centre piece of thee Rose Window in Durham Cathedral; own work, acrylic on wood
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Karen Kilby, whose patience, trust and gentle but consistent corrective insights helped to transform my initially overenthusiastic and somewhat naïve approach to theology and Scripture into a more balanced outworking of ideas that is hopefully less naïve but equally enthusiastic. Thanks are also due to Professor Roland Deines for his encouragement and the inspiring discussions about various aspects of the topic. Thank you both.

List of Figures

Because the topic of this dissertation involves beauty, it seemed appropriate to include a rich variety of visual illustrations. The icon on the front cover is “The Transfiguration of Jesus” by Andrei Rublev (1405; Annunciation Cathedral in the Moscow Kremlin). The pictures in the top margin are photos of Jerusalem taken by a static (weather) camera over a period of six months in different light and weather conditions. Details about these photos as well as all the other illustrations are presented at end of the dissertation.

Figure 2. Wheel Cross (detail of sculpture) by Fenwick Lawson; 2001, Gospel Garden, Lindisfarne
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Introduction

The initial motivation behind this dissertation was an interest in understanding the nature of the authority of Scripture and the implications of the divine inspiration of the canonical texts for conducting systematic biblical studies. My early investigations led first to the recognition of the relevance of the notion of divine beauty and then to the realisation that the description of the Transfiguration in the Synoptic Gospels, as well as the various allusions to it elsewhere in the Bible, might provide a biblical anchor that the dissertation could be structured around. Thus, one finding led to another, but the theme of biblical interpretation never ceased to be the central issue underlying the research. In order to unfold the successive layers of understanding that were acquired through the process, in the following chapters it seems best to proceed in reverse order and start, in Part 1, with a discussion of the Transfiguration, followed in Part 2 by the exploration of the notion of divine beauty, and concluding in Part 3 by looking at the bearing of these topics on ways of perceiving and interpreting Scripture. First, however, I would like to offer a summary of the presumptions concerning Scripture that guided this research.

My approach to Scripture

In the introduction of his recent book on beauty and Christian truth, contemporary American theologian David Bentley Hart states,

the postmodern indicates an auroral astonishment following upon a nocturnal oblivion: the West at long last awakes from the nightmare of philosophy, even the last ghosts of Enlightenment reason having been chased away, to discover and rejoice in the irreducibly aesthetic character and ultimate foundationlessness of “truth.”

This quote outlines a bold position that affirms and rejoices in the existence of higher-order truth and beauty as a (nonfoundationalist) foundation for thinking about God and Scripture. It is daring in the sense that it leaves behind the abstract intellectual reasoning of philosophy and the solid rationalism of the

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Enlightenment, which have been two pillars of much of Christian theology over the past two centuries. Instead, Hart believes that the power of Christian thought lies in its principal appeal “to the eye and heart” of people:

What Christian thought offers the world is not a set of “rational” arguments that (suppressing certain of their premises) force assent from others by leaving them, like the interlocutors of Socrates, at a loss for words; rather, it stands before the world principally with the story it tells concerning God and creation, the form of Christ, the loveliness of the practice of Christian charity — and the rhetorical richness of its idiom. Making its appeal first to the eye and heart, as the only way it may “command” assent, the church cannot separate truth from rhetoric, or from beauty.2

This dissertation approaches the question of biblical interpretation in the spirit of the above quotes: the focus will be on how “seeing” can enrich and complement the “hearing” of the truth and thus contribute to our Christian understanding. Biblical interpretation can take many forms and has targeted a range of different topics as central issues and dilemmas in the past. Some of these dilemmas, particularly in the post-Enlightenment period, have concerned questions about the authority of the Scriptures and the composition of the biblical canon. While queries about the authenticity and reliability of the final form of the biblical texts, as well as the extent to which these texts can be considered sacred, are potential stumbling blocks for people and therefore warrant discussion, I will be working alongside the Christian tradition that maintains that the Bible is a divinely inspired document; that is, regardless of the extensive human involvement of authors, redactors, scribe copiers and church authorities in shaping the biblical texts, ultimately it was God who – to use Wolterstorff’s terminology3 — “authorised” the resultant biblical canon. Having said that, I am aware of many subtle and less subtle challenges concerning biblical authorship, divine inspiration, the canonisation process and historical accuracy – to name but a few pertinent issues – and earlier drafts of this manuscript included lengthy discussions of such topics. As the dissertation evolved, however, it moved from considering such specific questions to examining a broader interpretive shift from “hearing” to

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2 Ibid., 4.

3 Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Unity Behind the Canon” in One Scripture or Many? Canon from Biblical, Theological, and Philosophical Perspectives (ed. Christine Helmer and Christof Landmesser; ). 228.
“seeing.” Therefore, due to space limitations, allow me to make just three general points at this stage:

1. The basic assumption underlying the approach to Scripture in this dissertation is the belief that despite the well-documented human involvement in producing, compiling, editing, copying and selecting the constituent texts of the biblical canon, God the Holy Spirit has caused the final form of the text to be in line with the divine will. I cannot see how God would allow us to have a Bible that is flawed in parts or that includes deception in it.

2. If we accept that the Bible has divine authority, this does not necessarily mean that this authority resides in each and every part equally. However, personally I found that I could not be selective because I identify with Isaiah when he wrote:

   Woe to you who strive with your Maker, 
earthen vessels with the potter! 
Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, “What are you making”? or “Your work has no handles”? (Isa 45:9)

With Scripture being “holy ground” for me, I could not think of any foundation that would legitimise my becoming a judge in these matters.

3. Even people who are in broad agreement about the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible may not see eye to eye about smaller, yet important, details within the corollaries and implications of these basic affirmations. The stormy disputes amongst evangelicals about the inerrancy versus infallibility of the Bible in the 20th century offer a telling example of how macro-level union can break down when it comes to a micro-level consideration of the biblical text. My response to the challenging questions of textual detail has been to start thinking of the biblical canon as a complex composition in the aesthetic sense: for example, as will be discussed in Part 2, with an abstract painting by Kandinsky, an intricate choral piece by Tallis or a play by Shakespeare it would not really affect my perception of the coherence or essence of the overall composition if some of the less salient details showed some variation as long as the composition was

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4 For a summary, see James D. G. Dunn, New Testament Theology: An Introduction (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2009), 79.
sufficiently robust. Indeed, James Barr suggests that even certain “changes in the
canon would probably have little or no effect in so far as they concerned the
marginal books of the canon,” a point that I will come back to in the third chapter.

Let me finish this Introduction with a quote by Stephen Travis that offers a
wise reflection on the divine authority of the Bible:

We can’t prove that the Bible is inspired. We can argue that it is reasonable
to expect that the kind of God who is revealed in Jesus wouldn’t leave us
floundering for the truth about him. We can show how seriously Jesus
regarded the Old Testament, and what claims various biblical writers made
for their writings. But we can’t prove that those claims are true. In the end
it’s a matter of faith – our own faith, and the faith of the church down the
ages. Recognizing that something is God’s word is an act of spiritual
discernment, of personal response.

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5 I believe this observation to be true even though I cannot define what exactly “less” salient means
in this context – a composition is undoubtedly more than the sum of its parts but I do not know how
much “more.”


1. The Transfiguration

Before embarking on his final journey to Jerusalem and ultimately to Calvary, Jesus took his three special disciples, Peter, John and James, and “led them up a high mountain” (Matt 17:1). There they experienced a rapid succession of dramatic events that involved the transfiguration of Jesus, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, the descent of God’s presence in a shining cloud and finally a personal address from God Almighty himself. The scene is described in the three Synoptic Gospels in brief but vivid forms that are virtually identical in the main details (Mark 9:2–13; Matt: 17:1–13; Luke 9:28–36), and F. F. Bruce is probably right in suggesting that behind Mark’s third-person narrative it is easy to discern Peter’s personal account: by simply changing “they” and “them” to “we” and “us,” and by replacing “Peter” with the pronoun “I,” Bruce offers the following eyewitness description of the events:

He was transfigured before us, and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to us Elijah with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus. And I said to Jesus, “Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” For I did not know what to say, for we were exceedingly afraid. And a cloud overshadowed us and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” And suddenly looking around we no longer saw any one with us but Jesus only.  

This short and seemingly matter-of-fact narrative may appear curiously unassuming, and yet few other events described in the New Testament (or indeed in the whole Bible) can match the intensity of divine revelation that Peter and his two fellow-disciples experienced on the Mount of Transfiguration. Indeed, Sergius Bulgakov characterises the Transfiguration as a time when “heaven is united with the earth” and Alan Culpeper rightly points out that the “account of the transfiguration records the kind of experience that only a privileged few ever had

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in the entire history of Israel and the early church. Mystics and saints have lived lives of disciplined piety in hopes of attaining such a beatific vision.”¹⁰

The unique significance of the Transfiguration is also reflected in its central position within the Gospel accounts. We come to the Transfiguration at a critical point within salvation history: just a week earlier Peter had declared on behalf of the disciples that Jesus was “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16), and from that point onwards Jesus started to talk about his forthcoming suffering, death and resurrection. His teaching also included the warning that if anybody wanted to follow him, they had to “deny themselves and take up their cross” (Matt 16:24) as well as a declaration about his second coming “in the glory of his Father” (Matt 16:27). The preparation stage was now over and the final, climactic phase of Jesus’ earthly life – involving the last journey to Jerusalem and the Passion – was about to begin. The Transfiguration therefore marks a watershed in Jesus’ ministry; in Michael Ramsey’s words, it represents a “height from which the reader looks down on one side upon the Galilean ministry and on the other side upon the Via Crucis.”¹¹

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ECHOES AND RESONANCES

Besides describing the disciples’ striking sensory experience of transcendental reality, a closer reading reveals that the Synoptic accounts of the Transfiguration contain many elements and themes that have special significance in the Bible in general; as Joel Green sums up, these narratives prime “a virtual choir of intertextual voices whose presence is so forceful that they threaten to drown out the narrator’s own voice.”12 Indeed, almost every element of the story echoes well-known and powerful Scriptural parallels that will resonate even in ordinary Jewish and Christian readers. It is as if within a short, intense sequence of images a far more extensive cosmic story had been summed up, allowing us “in one fixed instant of visionary clarity, to see and to reflect upon the entire mystery of the God-man and of the divinization of our humanity in Him.”13 As Stephen Williams concludes, at the Mount of Transfiguration “we are at the heart of the gospel.”14

Commentators have highlighted at least eight elements of the story that have wider biblical connotations; let us survey these echoes and resonances briefly, before considering the bigger picture.

(a) Mountain

Along with many other scholars, Joseph Ratzinger highlights the fact that in the Transfiguration “Once again the mountain serves ... as the locus of God’s particular closeness;”15 indeed, the reader will inevitably call to mind the famous mountains of Old Testament revelation – Sinai, Horeb and Moriah – as well as the various mountains in Jesus’ life; the mountain of his initial temptation (the phrase “high mountain” is a clear parallel with Matthew 4:8), the Mount of Beatitudes, the mountains of his night prayers, Calvary and the mountain of the Great Commission. As Ratzinger concludes, “They are all at one and the same time

15 Joseph Ratzinger, Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration (trans. Adrian J. Walker; London: Bloomsbury), 308.
mountains of passion and of Revelation, and they also refer in turn to the Temple Mount, where Revelation becomes liturgy.”

Perhaps the most important parallel in this respect is Moses’ ascent of Mount Sinai described in Exodus. As is recorded in Scripture, God called Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu as well as seventy of the elders of Israel up to himself, “and they saw the God of Israel” (24:10). Then Moses was told to come up to God on the mountain and wait there. We read in verses 16–18:

The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

The subsequent events concerning the Israelites’ idolatry with the golden calf are well known. However, after Moses’ petitioning, God had mercy on the Israelites and granted them a new start. In Exodus 33:18 we are told that Moses turned to God and appealed, “Show me your glory, I pray.” God responded favourably and called Moses to present himself on the top of Mount Sinai the next morning. We then read, “The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, ‘The LORD.’ The LORD passed before him…” (34:5–6). When Moses came down from the mountain, “the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God” (v. 29).

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16 Ibid., 309.
(b) The three disciples

The Transfiguration did not involve all the disciples but only three named ones, Peter, John and James. Given the parallels with the events on Mount Sinai described above, it may be more than mere coincidence that Moses also took three named associates – Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu – to Mount Sinai. It could perhaps have something to do with the decree in Deuteronomy 19:15 that a single witness’s account shall not suffice: “Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained.” After all, very soon after the Transfiguration Matthew reports Jesus himself emphasising that “every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses” (Matt 18:16).

![Figure 14. The three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, detail from Rublev’s Transfiguration (front cover); 1405, Annunciation Cathedral, Moscow Kremlin](image)

It is important to note that Peter, John and James were no “ordinary” disciples, but rather the “elders” of the Twelve. Along with Peter’s brother, Andrew, they are the first to be called by Jesus (Mark 1:16–20), and the Synoptic Gospels present Jesus as singling them out at other times as well, for example at the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31) and at the raising from the dead of Jairus’ twelve-year-old daughter (Mark 5:40–2). More importantly, after the Transfiguration these same three disciples are portrayed witnessing Jesus’ subsequent agony in Gethsemane, and therefore their presence can be seen to form an emphatic link between these two significant episodes which Luz contrasts as the “high” point and the “low” point of the story of Jesus.17 In both cases the three disciples were “weighed down with sleep” (Luke 9:32), but unlike in Gethsemane,

on the Mount of Transfiguration they managed to keep awake. We know little of James’ future except that he was the first martyr of the Twelve – and therefore had to be special for Herod to target him first – but Peter and John were soon recognised as the “pillars” of the church (Gal 2:9).

(c) Light and glory

Although only Luke’s account mentions specifically the word “glory” in relation to the Transfiguration, most scholars would agree with Michael Ramsey’s conclusion that the term summarises the dominant idea of all the three narratives.¹⁸ As Matthew records, when Jesus was transfigured in front of the disciples “his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Matt 17:2), and Mark adds that the dazzling whiteness of the clothes was “such as no one on earth could bleach them” (Mark 9:3). These descriptions suggest an optical phenomenon that goes beyond such earthly visual wonders as the northern lights or a beautiful sunset: the disciples were allowed to have a glimpse of God’s transcendental glory in the form of some bright, unearthly light. Glory and light are closely related to God’s revelation and kingdom throughout the whole Bible; for example, we read in the book of Revelation about New Jerusalem that “the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb” (21:23). And, of course, John (8:12) records Jesus saying, “I am the light of the world.” The light motif will be discussed later in the sections on John’s Gospel and the Eastern Orthodox Church, and God’s glory will be looked at in more detail in the section on beauty. Therefore, let me mention here just a few salient biblical resonances.

¹⁸ Ramsey, Glory and Transfiguration, 101.
Jesus’ radiant face evokes strong connotations of Moses’ radiant face in Exodus that needed to be veiled (Exodus 34:29–35), and elsewhere in the Old Testament we also find references to God’s shining face: In Psalm 4:6, King David prayed, “Let the light of your face shine on us, O LORD!”, and the well-known blessing of Israel that Aaron and his sons were to proclaim also includes the prayer that “the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you” (Num 6:25). In the New Testament, Jesus teaches in the Parable of the Weeds that “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt 13:43) and in Acts (6:15) Stephen’s face is described “like the face of an angel” when he was seized and brought before the Sanhedrin. Jesus’ dazzling white clothes and his radiant appearance also inevitably generate eschatological and Apocalyptic overtones of the glory of the Messiah and the saints in heaven. Consequently, many interpreters have related the Transfiguration to Jesus’ own predictions of the future glorious return of the Son of Man, particularly because of the declaration he made to his disciples prior to the Transfiguration of his second advent “with his angels in the glory of his Father” (Matt 16:27).

(d) Moses and Elijah

The appearance of two of the Old Testament’s principal heroes on the Mount of Transfiguration has given scholars much food for thought: Why Moses? Why Elijah? Why the two together and what is their relationship to Jesus? Moses, of course, strengthens the link of the passage with Exodus and Elijah is related to the Messianic theme, because of God’s promise at the end of Malachi (4:5): “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.” Interestingly, immediately prior to this verse, the Lord also mentions Moses – “Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel” (Mal 4:4) – and therefore Jesus’ two companions during the Transfigurations are the two people last

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named in the Old Testament (according to the Christian sequence of the OT books). The eschatological connotation is further augmented by Moses prefiguring the ultimate future prophet mentioned in Deuteronomy 18:18 – a link that will be made more salient by God’s utterance from the cloud (see below) – and it is in this light that Ramsey concludes about Moses and Elijah that “one is the predecessor, the other is the precursor of the Messiah.”

Ever since the Church fathers, scholars have often seen further significance in the appearance of Moses and Elijah in that the former represents the Law, the latter the Prophets, and thus the Transfiguration offers a visual summary of Jesus subsuming and superseding the OT material, thereby attesting to the unity of Scripture. Ramsey further sees in the scene on the holy mountain a symbolic depiction of the old covenant being surpassed by the new. In this respect, Bruce also highlights Romans 3:21, where Paul declares that “the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested to by the law and the prophets” – a verse that seems to be enacted at the Transfiguration.

Other scholars have been less willing to regard Moses and Elijah as symbols of the Law and Prophets, because while Moses can stand for the Jewish Law/Torah, Elijah is not normally seen to represent the prophets to complement Moses in this way. Instead, alternative explanations have been offered: for example, some commentators have suggested that the two Old Testament figures signify Israel’s past and thus Jesus’ spiritual ancestry or even the heavenly world in general; the two prophets’ appearance has also been linked to the unusual conclusion of their earthly lives; others have speculated that it may be significant

22 Ramsey, *Glory and Transfiguration*, 120.
23 Bruce, “Transfiguration,” 20.
27 Moses was buried by God unseen (Deut 34:5-6) and Elijah “ascended in a whirlwind into heaven” (2 Kings 2:11).
that both of them had a vision of the glory of God on a mountain;²⁸ some scholars have even noted that the two heavenly men appearing at the empty tomb (Luke 24:4) and at the ascension (Acts 1:10) have sometimes been identified with Moses and Elijah – Stephen Williams, for example, highlights the fact that in Luke’s accounts the same Greek preparatory word ἰδού (translated into English as “behold”) precedes all three of these references, and thus through the heavenly witnesses “Transfiguration, resurrection and ascension are joined as holy history.”²⁹

(e) The subject of the conversation between Jesus, Moses and Elijah

Luke records that the subject of the conversation between Jesus, Moses and Elijah was the “exodus,” that is, Jesus’ “departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (9:31). This is in harmony with the manifold other allusions to Exodus mentioned above, and it adds a new layer to the events: Nixon, for example, points out that “exodus” does not simply mean Jesus’ death but also “the great facts of his death and resurrection as the means of redemption of his people typified by the OT Exodus from Egypt,”³⁰ Green further argues that the salient presence of Exodus motifs is not constrained by the story in the Book of Exodus but also draws on the anticipations of the New Exodus as described in Isaiah.³¹ In any case, Liefeld is probably right in his conclusion about the “exodus” topic:

Whatever meaning may be found in the expression, it is a remarkable subject of conversation between Moses and Elijah. It could be taken as an indication that inhabitants of heaven were aware of and concerned with the destiny of Jesus at the cross. The two men, while not angels, do bring a heavenly interpretation of an event, as do angels at the resurrection and ascension in Luke.³²

(f) Peter’s offer to build three tents (or “tabernacles”)

Peter’s offer to erect three tents (or “tabernacles”) opened up a whole new line of scholarly discussion. First of all, it draws attention to the fact that the

²⁸ Moses on Sinai (Exod 24:15) and Elijah on Horeb (1 Kgs 19:8).
²⁹ Williams, “Transfiguration 2,” 20.
³² Liefeld, “Transfiguration,” 838.
Transfiguration – according to many scholars – took place during the Feast of Tabernacles (or “Sukkoth”), thereby linking the event to the symbolic content of this major Jewish holiday. Hence Ramsey believes that Peter’s wish to perpetuate the scene “is blended in his mind with the Feast of Tabernacles and with the imagery of the tabernacling of God with His people.” In this respect, Jewish readers would also recall Zechariah’s apocalyptic vision of the final days (14:1–21), in which we read, “Then all who survive of the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the festival of booths” (v 16) – accordingly, the tents carry definite eschatological connotations. For Christian readers, the beginning of John’s Gospel is also highly relevant, where John declares that “the Word (Christ) became flesh (human, incarnate) and tabernacled (fixed His tent of flesh, lived awhile) among us” (John 1:14; AMP). Furthermore, it might be more than mere coincidence that the same verse in John’s Gospel continues with “and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son,” a passage that is often seen as the most explicit reference in John’s Gospel to the Transfiguration (I will come back to this point in the section on John’s Gospel below).

There has been a great deal of speculation about the exact purpose of Peter’s suggestion and why it was ignored by Jesus. The Synoptic narratives indicate that Peter was not fully aware of what he blurted out, and commentators have offered a range of views on what the intended meaning of his speech act may have been. The most widely held view is that Peter wished – inappropriately but understandably – to “secure in place, if not tie down and domesticate, the wild spirit of God’s kingdom,” but while this may be true, it is no more than educated guesswork as we simply cannot tell what exactly Peter had in mind. The evangelists recording the event do not offer much clarification: Matthew makes no comment at all and Luke (9:33) merely adds, “not knowing what he said.” Mark provides the most

33 Cf. e.g. Ratzinger, Jesus, 306.
34 Ramsey, Glory and Transfiguration, 115.
elaborate explanation about Peter’s state of mind – which supports the suggestion that he drew on Peter’s personal account – but even Mark only says, “He did not know what to say, for they were terrified” (Mark 9:6). In other words, Peter was at a loss about how to react beyond the urge to respond, and was still wondering about his exclamation even when he recounted the story to Mark later. In any case, the uncertainty surrounding Peter’s response to the scene on the holy mountain parallels the overall uncertainty of Western theologians about what to make of the Transfiguration.

*(g) Cloud*

The bright cloud overshadowing the Mount of Transfiguration is a clear and recognisable sign of the divine presence of God himself, which was confirmed later by a heavenly voice speaking from the cloud. This cloud inevitably evokes the memory of the cloud that was hovering over the Tent of Meeting when God was present, once again evoking the Exodus story, particularly if we also recall the cloud that enveloped Mount Sinai when the Lord gave Moses the Ten Commandments and the other laws (Exod 19:16–19; 24:15–18). In addition, in Acts we read in the account of Jesus’ Ascension that “a cloud took him out of their sight” (1:9), and the coming of the Son of man is also described in Daniel 7:13 as being “with the clouds of heaven.” Mark records Jesus himself using this latter image when he talked about his second coming (Mark 13:26, 14:62) and Revelation 1:7 again describes the return of Christ with clouds. Liefeld is therefore right when he points out that the cloud motif can refer both to the past (the exodus) and the future (the *Parousia*).³⁷

³⁷ Liefeld, “Transfiguration,” 839.
(h) God’s voice

The Transfiguration is a distinctive event in the New Testament in the sense that not only are there multiple visible signs of God’s presence and manifest glory, but at one point God’s voice actually addresses the disciples in an audible form. The message is only a few words long: in each of the three Synoptic Gospels it starts with “This is my Son”, then continues with a description of God the Father’s unique relationship with, and love for, the Son – “the Beloved” (Mark), “the Beloved; with him I am well pleased” (Matt) and “my Chosen” (Luke) – and finally ends with the same instruction, “listen to him!” There is an obvious parallel here with God’s addressing the people at Jesus’ baptism (“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased;” Matt 3:17), but these words also echo Isaiah’s first Servant Song:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.” (Isa 42:1)

Finally, the concluding “listen to him” instruction strongly alludes to God’s promised future prophet in Deuteronomy 18: 18–19:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.

In addition to these three powerful allusions, Luz also highlights what is not said by God: there is no mention of Moses and Elijah, which automatically elevates Jesus above these OT heroes.38 In this sense, God’s words can be seen as an interpretation of what the disciples have seen and a response to Peter’s suggestion: By offering to build three tents, Peter perhaps inadvertently placed the three heavenly beings on an equal footing, and God’s voice indicated unambiguously Jesus’ supremacy.39

38 Luz, Matthew, 398.
39 Cf. Lee, Transfiguration, 22.
ENIGMATIC MEANING

The brief survey above shows that the Transfiguration has offered scholars several lines of fruitful research on the biblical parallels and echoes of the various elements of the narrative. There is a general agreement in the literature, however, that these research efforts have led only to rather limited success with regard to understanding the broader meaning of the Transfiguration; for example, Luz explains that one reason why the Transfiguration passage is difficult to interpret is exactly because of the multitude of possible associations and reminiscences of biblical and Jewish materials it contains without a definitive key in the tradition to unlock it. He therefore sees it as a story “of manifold meanings”40 and, arguing in a similar vein, Green adds that because of the overwhelming presence of various biblical motifs, the meaning of the text “overflow[s] the boundaries of a strictly denotative interpretation.”41 This does not mean that contemporary theologians have not theorised about the meaning of the Transfiguration narrative; quite the opposite: theories have abounded, including seeing the Transfiguration as an ancient epiphany story, a transposed resurrection account, a misplaced ascension narrative, an apocalyptic revelation, the enthronement of the Messiah as the mystical king in the order of Melchisedek, an exodus motif, the fusion of the two covenants, a positive counter-image to the temptation story and – most commonly – the foreshadowing of the Parousia.42 Thus, some scholars tried to trace the essence of the event backwards, some others forwards, and still some others claimed that the most appropriate approach is bidirectional.43 This diversity of views is a reflection of the elusiveness of the interpretation of the event,44 and yet –

40 Luz, Matthew, 395.
43 E.g. Nixon concludes, “The transfiguration is therefore a focal point in the revelation of the kingdom of God, for it looks back to the OT and shows how Christ fulfils it, and it looks on to the great events of the cross, resurrection, ascension and parousia.” Nixon, “Transfiguration,” 1200.
as mentioned above briefly – we also find a broad recognition amongst commentators that the Transfiguration offers some kind of a composite of the whole Gospel tradition; for example, in an often-quoted paper, Allison Trites states that the Transfiguration presents “the gospel in microcosm,” while Williams concludes that “Here the diverse elements in the theology of the New Testament meet.”

This is a curious situation: all the three Synoptic Gospels describe a spectacular manifestation of God’s glory – and indeed God’s actual presence – at a crucial point in Jesus’ ministry, and yet modern scholarship is struggling to find a meaning for the event; although almost all the elements of the narrative carry well-documented biblical familiarity, we are in a position not unlike that of the Apostle Peter, who “did not know what to say” (Mark 9:6). Could this uncertainty be caused by the fact that we are not looking for the meaning in the right place? While it might sound strange to say such a thing about the transfiguration of Jesus Christ, what if this event was ultimately not about Jesus but about the three witnessing disciples? Let us examine this possibility.

**Focus on the disciples**

If we lay aside for the moment the echoes and allusions to past and future events associated with the various details of the Transfiguration and focus instead on the event itself, the most striking aspect is undoubtedly the revelation of God’s glory in a visible form. In Bruce’s words,

For a few moments the heavenly glory which was normally veiled by the conditions of our Lord’s incarnate life shone through His body and its covering. The three apostles who were granted the vision could perhaps not have said whether they were in the body or out of the body; but they saw more of the glory of the Lord in the holy mount than ever Moses had seen at Sinai.47

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46 Williams, “Transfiguration 2,” 26-27.
47 Bruce, “Transfiguration,” 20.
As this summary illustrates, if we consider the revelation of God’s glory to be the central element of the Transfiguration scene, this brings the three disciples, the audience of the revelation, into the foreground. Previously, Jesus had more than once gone to pray alone, but this time he took with him his three favoured disciples so that they could witness the events that were to take place. In the Synoptic narratives, the whole episode is framed from the vantage-point of the disciples as they experience the transfiguring Christ and as they are finally addressed by God from the cloud. In linguistic theory such an approach is termed an “audience design,” and a similar position is adopted by Williams when he writes,

I have not even mentioned the significance of the transfiguration for Jesus himself. The reason is that I believe that it is, on the whole, safest to approach the account as does 2 Peter, namely as a visual manifestation and verbal revelation for the benefit of others.”

By bringing the disciples into the limelight, the rather elusive Transfiguration story suddenly opens up, as we find in the literature several interesting and plausible explanations of the meaning and purpose of the event from the disciples’ perspective. Without aiming to be comprehensive, let me summarise some of the best-known views:

- In a famous homily that has often been seen as the summary of the church fathers’ understanding of the Transfiguration, Leo the Great suggested that the “great reason for this transfiguration was to remove the scandal of the cross from the hearts of his disciples, and to prevent the humiliation of his voluntary

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49 Williams, “Transfiguration 2,” 27.
suffering from disturbing the faith of those who had witnessed the surpassing glory that lay concealed.” A similar emphasis has also been made in the Orthodox Church and is expressed in a hymn (a “kontakion”) sung during the Feast of the Transfiguration (August 6th):

On the Mountain You were Transfigured, O Christ God,  
And Your disciples beheld Your glory as far as they could see it;  
So that when they would behold You crucified,  
They would understand that Your suffering was voluntary,  
And would proclaim to the world,  
That You are truly the Radiance of the Father!51

Rowan Williams has summed up this point as follows: “Peter, James and John are allowed to see Christ’s glory so that when they witness his anguish and death they may know that these terrible moments are freely embraced by the God-made-human who is Jesus, and held within the infinite depth of life.”52

- In his classic work on systematic theology, Lewis Chafer suggested that the Transfiguration was a kind of reassurance to the disciples, motivated by the postponement of the imminent establishment of the kingdom of God: “it was essential to verify the promise of the kingdom and thus give full assurance of its final realization; and that is precisely the thing which the transfiguration accomplished. Three eyewitnesses were chosen to see the Son of man coming in the glory of His kingdom.”53

- Hans Urs von Balthasar emphasises that the real metamorphosis the disciples were to see was not the transformation from the servant-form of Jesus into the form of God (as we usually think) but rather the reverse, the metamorphosis of the divine form back into the form of servant. It was intended, according to Balthasar, to “teach the disciples to read and understand the servant-form as the very form of God. Everything about Jesus which appears to be his ‘nature’

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53 Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology (Vol. 5; Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948/1993), 89.
must now be interpreted by the disciples’ faith as the action and love of God.”

Dorothy Lee also sees the ultimate lesson of the Transfiguration as its teaching the disciples that “the glorious Son of God is also the obedient Son, and that their salvation depends on his capacity to ascend the Mount of Olives.”

Finally, and related to the above points, several scholars mention the encouragement of the disciples as the main motive behind the Transfiguration. For example, the late church father Anastasius of Sinai interpreted God’s intention for the disciples as “to banish from their hearts any possible doubt concerning the kingdom and to confirm their faith in what lay in the future by its prefiguration in the present.” However, Ramsey makes a valid point in asking that if the Transfiguration was to sustain the disciples’ faith in the dark hours ahead during and immediately after the Passion, why was there an injunction to be silent about it until after the Resurrection? “Why was so welcome an aid to faith to be denied to others?” One answer, already offered by Origen, may be that if people at large had been told about Jesus’ glorification, it would have been particularly damaging for them to see him suffering and being crucified.

As the above selection of proposed explications illustrates, focusing on the disciples in trying to make sense of the deeper significance of the Transfiguration is a promising avenue. Although the various interpretations do not coincide fully with each other, they share a common theme: a focus on the transformation of the disciples as a result of witnessing God’s glory. In the above quotes we find phrases like “remove the scandal of the cross from the hearts of his disciples,” “banish from their hearts any possible doubt” and “teach the

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58 Origen, *Commentary on Matthew XII/43*. 
disciples to read and understand the servant-form,” all pointing towards the conclusion that the privilege of witnessing Jesus’ transfiguration was a life-changing – or transfiguring – moment for the witnesses themselves. As Rowan Williams explains, “When Jesus is transfigured, it is as if there is a brief glimpse of the end of all things – the world aflame with God’s light. In the strength of that glimpse, things become possible.” If this was indeed the intended purpose and the events on the Mount of Transfiguration were primarily aimed at the three disciples who experienced the revelation of divine glory first-hand, then this might explain why commentators have been somewhat at a loss when trying to understand the significance of the Transfiguration for subsequent generations of Christians whose experience was by necessity second-hand, restricted to reading about the Transfiguration in the Gospels. Let us therefore go back to the biblical accounts to see how the transformational experience of the Transfiguration was processed.

**PROCESSING THE “TRANSFIGURING MOMENT”**

Although the Transfiguration offered a distinctive, multisensory experience, a glimpse into a transcendental reality that is normally veiled from humans, it is described only in three short passages in the Synoptics and we find only one direct reference to it elsewhere in the Bible, a brief mention at the beginning of 2 Peter. This is peculiar if it had indeed had a transformational impact, and, furthermore, the absence of any direct mention of the event is rather conspicuous in the fourth Gospel. In this respect, the Apostle Paul’s case is also relevant. On the road to Damascus he went through a transfiguring experience that shared several features with the Transfiguration (see later in detail). Because this episode formed the foundation of the legitimacy of his apostolic mission, we can find several descriptions of it in Acts (the story is reiterated three times in chs. 9, 22 and 26), and yet, in his epistles Paul never gave a personal account of this experience, nor did he provide any detail about his other documented transcendent experience of being “caught up to the third heaven” (2 Cor 12:2). Commenting on this, Vladimir

Lossky asks, “What, in reality, can one say of the mystical experience of St. Paul ... To venture to pass any judgement upon the nature of this experience it would be necessary to understand it more fully than did St. Paul, who avows his ignorance: ‘I cannot tell: God knoweth.”’

One reason for the reluctance to describe a transcendent experience in NT times may have been, according to Alan Segal, the existence of rabbinic rules that explicitly forbade public discussion of mystic phenomena. In fact, Segal suggests that it is these rules that explain why Paul could not divulge his experience of the “third heaven” in his own name but adopted instead a pseudopigraphical approach in 2 Corinthians 12. However, even if these prohibitions affected early Jewish Christian believers, they may not have been the only reason for the difficulty to verbalise transcendent experiences, because we come across a similar silence about such matters in later Christian contexts as well. Lossky, for example, points out that the individual experiences of the greatest mystics of the Orthodox Church – whose monastic lives were to a large extent centred around re-living the Transfiguration experience (see later in detail) – mostly remain unknown to us. The best-known exception to this has been St. Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022), who left several expressive records of his personal experiences of the vision of God; however, elsewhere Lossky explains that St. Symeon’s writings on his mystical experiences were originally destined only for monks already practised in the contemplative life. Even in the Western literature it was only at a comparatively late period, towards the thirteenth century, that records of mystical individualism first appeared; for example, St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) spoke directly of his personal experience of this kind only once, in the Sermons on the Song of Songs, and as Lossky points out, even then with considerable reluctance, after the example of Paul.

61 Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990), 58.
62 Ibid., 20.
While the individual differences of the various experiences referred to above make generalisations difficult, it is noteworthy to read a contemporary account of the reticence of Joseph the Hesychast (1898-1959), who was one of the most highly esteemed elders within the monastic world of Mount Athos in the 20th century. In the preface of a collection of his letters, a former disciple of his recalls the following:

Despite his natural gift of narrating, many times it would seem that he was having difficulty when he would try to speak to us about divine illumination and the various states of grace, because human vocabulary was poor and insufficient for him to express those deep meanings. He would become silent and distant, unable to communicate to us those things which exist in the utterly unknowable, superbrilliant apex of mystics – where the simple and absolute, the immutable and ineffable mysteries of theology lie.\(^6\)

It seems therefore that someone who has experienced a transfiguring moment might not want to, or might not be able to, write much about it because there is in fact not that much that can be written – the essence of the experience cannot be captured in words. We are more likely to be told about the fruit of these experiences: “wisdom, understanding of the divine mysteries, expressing itself in theological or moral teaching or in advice for the edification of one’s brethren.”\(^6\)

On the other hand, these people would not hesitate to confirm that they have had the experience, and we will see below that we find exactly this kind of confirmation in 2 Peter and Acts, and more indirectly also in John’s Gospel. Let us now look at these specific sources in detail.

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2 Peter

2 Peter is regarded by the majority of contemporary scholars as a pseudepigraphical work written after the Apostle Peter’s death, and doubts about the authorship were already noted by such church fathers as Eusebius and Origen. Without wishing to go into the intricate question of the nature of authorship in NT times, the literature on 2 Peter suggests that while certain parts of the letter bear the marks of an author/redactor/scribe other than the Apostle himself, the epistle does contain some genuine “apostolic testimony” (i.e. material which originated from or was authorised by Peter himself). The reference to the Transfiguration (2 Pet 1:16–18) is consistently mentioned as being first amongst these materials, and since my discussion concerns this particular passage, I will refer to it as Petrine material. The reference itself is short, consisting of three verses only, but it is noteworthy because it leaves no doubt that the text concerns a first-hand experience of the events that took place on the Mount of Transfiguration:

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. (2 Pet 1:16–18)

Although the passage clearly identifies the Transfiguration, in accordance with the earlier discussion, we are not told anything about the nature of the experience beyond the fact that the Transfiguration did take place and involved seeing Jesus’ glory and hearing God’s voice. Instead, Peter cites the reality of the Transfiguration as evidence to support the main theme of the letter, the confrontation of false teachers’ eschatological scepticism regarding the Parousia. In the passage quoted above, he cites the Transfiguration as a proof that the future coming of Jesus Christ is not merely a “cleverly devised myth” since the Apostle

himself has seen Christ’s glory with his own eyes and heard God’s affirmation with his own ears. That is, the Transfiguration experience is presented as such a fundamental reality that it was considered sufficient to provide evidence for the cornerstone of Christian eschatological belief, the promise of the second coming of Jesus Christ. This shows that the events on the Mount of Transfiguration were foundational to the Apostle’s beliefs. This point has been elaborated on in a recent commentary by Harink as follows:

By recalling the glorious apocalyptic event of the transfiguration of our Lord, Peter directs a strong word against the theological rationalisms, reductionisms, and relativisms of his age and ours. While he offers a vigorous apologia for the truth of the gospel, he does not appeal to a foundation in universal rational first principles, available to everyone everywhere, or to an a priori universal religious sense, variously modified by historical and cultural experience – the standard post-Enlightenment modes of apologia for religious truth. Instead, Peter goes directly to his and the other apostles being eyewitnesses of an apocalypse of the truth of Jesus Christ.68

After verses 16-18, the Apostle could have stopped; he had made the point that the Transfiguration was a powerful confirmation and foretaste of the Parousia. Yet, Peter does not stop here but rather – possibly motivated by further accusations made by false teachers about the invalidity of the interpretation of OT prophecies – in the next three verses he offers further grounds for confidence in the reality of Jesus’ future coming, namely the prophecies foretelling the event:

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (vv. 19–21)

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The first important point to note about this passage is that Peter does not follow the common practice of NT authors whereby prophets are quoted as authorities in their own right, but uses the Transfiguration as a source of authentication of the truth of the prophesies: “So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed” (v. 19). Having established the credentials of the prophetic message, Peter goes on to caution readers that they need to be “attentive” to this message “as to a lamp shining in dark places, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”. The allusion to Psalm 119:105 (“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path”) suggests that Peter is thinking of the “message” in terms of Scripture, and this is confirmed in the next two verses, which constitute one of the most important biblical testimonies about the divine inspiration of Scripture and biblical interpretation: “First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (vv 20-21). Thus, Peter offers a concise but far-reaching argument made up of three parts: (a) God’s tangible revelation – that is, the Transfiguration – validates the prophetic messages in Scripture about the Parousia; (b) and while we are waiting for the “morning star” (i.e. Jesus; Rev 22:16), this scriptural message can be the lamp that Christian believers can turn to for sustenance, (c) because every “prophecy of scripture” reflects divine revelation.

To summarise, in this passage the divine revelation of God’s glory at the Transfiguration is directly linked in a tight argument sequence to God’s divine revelation in (prophetic) Scripture; in Harink’s words, “The transfiguration reveals to us the proper understanding of the origin and interpretation of holy scripture.”69

This parallel is further strengthened by the fact that Peter uses the same Greek word (φέρω) to refer to the divine voice that “came” from heaven in verses 17 and 18 as to prophecy in verse 21, leading Douglas Moo to conclude: “The words Peter and the other apostles heard from heaven at the Transfiguration and the words that the prophets spoke came from the same place: God himself.”70 And what is particularly noteworthy from the point of view of this dissertation, there is a vision of light at both sides of this parallel between Transfiguration and scriptural

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69 Ibid., 160.
70 Moo, 2 Peter and Jude, 79.
prophecy: the shining face of Jesus at the Transfiguration and the “a lamp shining in a dark place” in Peter’s reference to Scripture (2 Pet 1:19). This might be the answer to the frequently asked question as to why Peter cited the Transfiguration as the basis of his argument rather than the more obvious Resurrection? Even though from a Christological point of view the Resurrection clearly carries more significance within salvation history, at this point Peter’s emphasis was on the divine light that he was privileged to behold on the Mount of Transfiguration because this light can also shine through Scripture to those who are attentive throughout the dark times of waiting for the Second Coming. That is, Peter referred to the Transfiguration because it manifested the glory of Jesus, which attentive eyes can also “see” through Scripture.

In conclusion, 2 Peter 1:16–21 indicates that for Peter the memory of the Transfiguration was foundational to the truth of the Gospel message, so much so that when false teachers started to question the reality of the Christian expectation of the Parousia, it was the reality of the Transfiguration – which he could attest to as an eye- and ear-witness – that he cited as irrefutable evidence that the apostles were not preaching cleverly invented myths. He even went one step further and declared that the Transfiguration was also a source of confirmation of the truth of scriptural prophecy in general, a truth that can shine as a sustaining light in its own right during the periods of darkness while we wait for Jesus’ return.

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71 E.g. Ramsey, Glory and Transfiguration, 125.
72 While the reference in 2 Peter is specifically to the OT prophets, I agree with Moo that it is unlikely that Peter would have wanted to limit this ascriptions to one part of the Old Testament only rather than applying it more widely, including writings that were later included in the NT canon (Moo, 2 Peter and Jude, 85.); after all, 2 Peter contains a unique endorsement of Paul’s letters highlighting that they were written “with the wisdom that God gave him” (2 Pet 3:15–16 NIV).
John’s Gospel

John’s Gospel comes to us anonymously, and the only reference to authorship is to the Beloved Disciple “who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true” (John 21:24). Church tradition has it that this disciple was the Apostle John, which would be in accordance with his taking part in the Last Supper where he “reclined next to Jesus at the supper” (v. 20). Although, we cannot tell how much of the Gospel was actually “authored” or “authorised” by John himself – the literature on this question is extensive and diverse – I do believe that the Gospel originates from the Johannine circle, which means that at least some of the material could be traced back to John. In line with church conventions, in the following I will refer to the author as “John,” but the Apostle’s personal authorship will not be emphasised in the arguments.

John’s Gospel presents a curious relationship with the Transfiguration. On the one hand, it does not contain a single explicit reference to the events that took place on the holy mountain; on the other hand, it can be seen to offer, in many ways, the most insightful biblical interpretation of the Transfiguration of all: below I will attempt to show that instead of describing the Transfiguration as an episode in Jesus’ life story – as the Synoptic Gospels do – John used it as the guiding light shed on every part of Jesus’ ministry. Taken in this sense, John’s Gospel obediently follows God’s instruction coming from the cloud to listen to his Son, but the question still remains: why did the Gospel not follow the Synoptic example and refer to the scene on the holy mountain directly?

The absence of the Transfiguration

We saw earlier that it may not be easy, or even natural, to verbalise personal experiences of God’s tangible presence and revelation, yet in the case of John’s Gospel the absence of any mention of the Transfiguration is still conspicuous: after all, this is a Gospel describing Jesus’ earthly ministry in a great deal of descriptive detail, so why omit this particular episode? This is all the more surprising given that some of the overarching themes of the Gospel – especially the motifs of glory and light – are in complete harmony with the experience of the Transfiguration.
Indeed, it is a common view amongst commentators (as we will see below) to presume that instead of relating the Transfiguration story directly, John referred to it continuously but indirectly. Even so, it is still difficult to see why John’s efforts to weave the experience of the Transfiguration into the fabric of the Gospel implicitly should have excluded any explicit description of the event rather than having exactly the opposite effect and warrant a specific mention of it.

When scholars address this puzzle, they almost always start by pointing out that the omission of the Transfiguration is not the only peculiar absence in John’s Gospel: John does not offer, either, the same kind of descriptive accounts as the Synoptics of pivotal themes such as the virgin birth, Jesus’ baptism, the Temptation, the institution of the Last Supper or the agony in the garden of Gethsemane, even though he makes references to most of these events. Because I do not think that anybody would disagree with Barrett’s conclusion that it is unthinkable that John would have dismissed such incidents as unimportant, we must accept that for some reason he was not interested in re-telling these episodes in a narrative manner. In any case, with regard to the Transfiguration it seems likely that the absence of any mention of it did not indicate a lack of significance attached to it by John, but to the contrary: Ramsey was probably right when he proposed that John omitted the Transfiguration “because he understood its meaning so well.” Indeed, the following conclusion by F. F. Bruce about the indirect presence of the Transfiguration through allusions and echoes in John’s Gospel expresses a scholarly consensus:

John’s Gospel has no transfiguration story; but his whole Gospel is in a sense a commentary on the transfiguration. “We beheld his glory,” says John, and endeavours to make his readers enter into the experience which was granted to the three on the mount.

The same point is made by John Ashton expressively: “The Fourth Gospel, of course, has no room for a transfiguration, for the Johannine Jesus is

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74 Barrett, *St John*, 52.
transfigured, so to speak, from the outset.”77 And he continues, “The Johannine Jesus carries his glory with him and his garments are always ‘glistening intensely white’.”78 Indeed, Transfiguration motifs permeate the narrative and symbolism of the Gospel to such an extent that “whole of the Gospel could be viewed as a ‘transfiguration’ story.”79 John’s Gospel proclaimed the glory of the risen Lord not by zooming in on the Mount of Transfiguration where the disciples were allowed a temporary glimpse of God’s revelation but by offering a perpetual representation of God’s glory as it pervaded the whole of the ministry of Christ. If this was indeed an intentional approach, we should be able to find unmistakable reflections and marks of it in the text. Let us have a look at some passages that might be likely candidates in this respect.

**John 1:14**

The Prologue of John’s Gospel (1:1–18) is undoubtedly one of the seminal Bible passages underlying Christian theology, as it captures many of the themes and symbols that are later developed in the Gospel. Within this Prologue, the well-known “Word became flesh...” verse is regarded by many as the high point80:

> And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (v. 14)

As we have seen earlier when discussing the tent motif at the Transfiguration, both parts of the compound sentence making up this verse contain echoes to the events on the holy mountain: in the first clause the actual meaning of the Greek verb σκηνόω (translated in the NRSV as “lived”) involves to “pitch a tent” or to “tabernacle”, and in the second clause the reference to seeing the glory of the Father’s Son is regarded by many – though not everybody – as a veiled allusion to the disciples’ experiencing the transfiguration of Christ.81 This might already be no

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78 Ibid., 501.
81 E.g. Raymond Brown concludes, “Thus, there is much to recommend the suggestion that 14c,d is an echo of the Transfiguration.” Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)* (London: Chapman, 1966), 34; cf. also Liefeld, “Transfiguration,” 836; David Wenham and A. D. A. Moses. “‘There Are Some Standing Here...’: Did They Become the ‘Reputed Pillars’ of the
coincidence in a text placed in such a prominent location of the Gospel where every word was clearly carefully considered, but the Transfiguration theme becomes even more salient if we bring together the meanings of the two clauses, which is curiously rarely done in commentaries: what we have is a summary of the two natures of Christ, the incarnate human and the glorious eternal, and thus the verse may be read to proclaim that although Christ was mainly known to us in his human form, his glorious form was also evidenced by the author. The verse, then, can be seen as marking the theological link between the Incarnation and the Transfiguration,\(^2\) as Dorothy Lee explains,

Indeed, the central symbol of the Fourth Gospel is that the divine Word has crossed the divide between divine and human and entered the domain of matter. In the incarnation, the glory of God gleams through the flesh of Jesus; in symbolic and metaphorical terms, the flesh becomes the medium of divine glory.\(^3\)

**John 12:28–36 and 41**

A further verse in John’s Gospel that has been cited as a possible allusion to the Transfiguration is 12:28, where Jesus says,

“Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”

The reference to glory coming from the Father and the affirming heavenly voice become particularly reminiscent of the Transfiguration if we look at the subsequent verses: Jesus goes on to talk about his death and then, in 12:35–36, identifies himself with light:

The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.

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\(^2\) Solrunn Nes comments on this point: “This excerpt from the prologue of Saint John holds within itself the seed of the dogma of the two natures of Christ and underlines the close relationship between the Incarnation and the Transfiguration. In Bethlehem God clothes himself in man’s nature, on Tabor he manifests his divine nature.” Solrunn Nes, *The Uncreated Light: An Iconographical Study of the Transfiguration in the Eastern Church* (trans. Arlyn Moi; Grand Rapid, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007), 42.

\(^3\) Lee, *Transfiguration*, 126.
The significance of the light motif will be explored below, but first let me highlight here one more passage in this chapter that is usually not mentioned in the context of Transfiguration allusions but which, nevertheless, offers a strong indication that John was following a conscious interpretive agenda in his Gospel. Commenting on the people’s unbelief in spite of the signs and wonders Jesus has performed, John cites the well-known passage from Isaiah 6:10 concerning the people’s blinded eyes and hardened hearts; then he declares: “Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory…” (12:41). It is remarkable that John attributes Isaiah’s ultimate wisdom to “seeing Jesus’ glory,” that is, to a transfiguring experience by the prophet, and this angle is given support by the fact that Isaiah describes an experience of theophany at the beginning of the very chapter that John’s quote comes from (6:1–5)\(^84\). It seems to me likely that someone who talked about Isaiah seeing Jesus’ glory was aware of, and was in fact thinking in terms of, the “Transfiguration paradigm”.

**Light and glory**

The Transfiguration involved as a central element a bright, divine light gleaming from Jesus’ face and clothes, a light that Orthodox Christianity has referred to as the “uncreated light” (see later in detail). John’s Gospel parallels the centrality of light at the Transfiguration by associating at the very beginning of the Prologue (vv 4–5) the Logos with the light of creation and then in verses 6–7 – through the testimony of John the Baptist – Jesus with the “true light”. This imagery is then famously reinforced in 8:12, where Jesus declares, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life,” a statement he reiterates in 9:5. This light/darkness contrast is further advanced in several other places in the Gospel to outline a dualistic cosmos in which light battles with darkness (e.g. 3:19–21; 9:4–5; 11:9–10; 12:35–36)\(^85\), which supports

\(^{84}\) Brown explains that John may have followed the Targum here where in 6:1 Isaiah sees “the glory of the Lord” and in 6:5 “the glory of the shekinah of the Lord.” Brown, *John*, 486.

Shirbroun’s argument that for John to believe in the light was largely synonymous with Christian faith and to walk in the light with Christian ethics.  

As will be elaborated on in the second part of the dissertation, divine light and God’s glory are not independent from each other, and light is often portrayed as the perceivable manifestation of God’s transcendental glory. Therefore, parallel to the significance of light in John’s Gospel, the theme of glory also assumes a prominent place as it runs through the whole narrative: the word-group “glory/glorify” is used by John more often (41 times) than in the three Synoptic Gospels together (37 times). We read that divine glory was associated with Jesus already “before the world existed” (17:5), and that Jesus prayed that his followers should be allowed to see his glory which the Father has given him “before the foundation of the world” (17:24). For the three disciples this prayer was granted on the Mount of Transfiguration.

![Figure 49. Transfiguration (scene from the Passion Window); c1150, Chartres Cathedral](image)

**The Wedding at Cana**

If John’s Gospel portrays the entire ministry of Jesus as a manifestation of divine glory, this must be particularly true of the signs Jesus performed as these were the most tangible expression of Jesus’ divine status and the transformational power of God’s glory. The Gospel contains seven famous miraculous signs, and as the first of these, the wedding at Cana (2:1–11) has special significance in marking the initiation of Jesus ministry. For this reason it is particularly noteworthy that this

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episode offers a number of intriguing parallels with the Transfiguration. To start with, the nature of the miracle performed in Cana involves a kind of “transfiguration,” though not a physical change in Jesus himself: water used for the Jewish rites of purification – and thus symbolising Jewish traditions – is turned into wine, which can be seen as the symbolic meaning of the advent of Jesus. The narrative itself starts with a time marker (“on the third day”), which has the same function as the prominent time markers at the beginning of the Synoptic descriptions of the Transfiguration story (“six/eight days later”), namely to create an explicit connection with the material that comes before it. So, what is the preceding material? Here we find a striking similarity between the Synoptics and John’s Gospel, summarised in the following table form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Synoptic narratives</th>
<th>John’s Gospel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before the Transfiguration, Peter declared, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” (Matt 16:16).</td>
<td>Before the wedding at Cana, Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (John 1:49).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus then spoke about his second coming “in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38) and made the disciples the following promise:</td>
<td>Jesus then said, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these” (v 50), and made the disciples the following promise:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.” (Mark 9:1)</td>
<td>“Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” (John 1:51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” (Matt 16:28)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

89 Lee, Transfiguration, 106.
90 Although Jesus spoke to Nathanael only, both instances of the Greek word for “you” in the promise are in plural.
Thus, both in the Synoptics and John’s Gospel a disciple’s recognition of Jesus being the Messiah leads to a promise by Jesus that some disciples will have a glorious experience of the reality of the kingdom of God; even the phrase that Jesus uses to start the promises with is similar: “(Very) Truly I tell you.” It is difficult to imagine that these textual and contextual parallels are purely coincidental, and if we consider the rest of the wedding story, we find one more curious correspondence with the Transfiguration narrative: in both cases people are told, in effect, to “Listen to my son”: On the Mount of Transfiguration Jesus’ Father declares, “Listen to him!” whereas at the wedding at Cana Jesus’ mother declares, “Do whatever he tells you” (2:5) (i.e. “listen to him!”).

Of course, the two stories also display considerable differences, with the most important being Jesus’ initial reluctant attitude at the wedding, expressed in his response to his mother’s first call to him to do something, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come” (2:4). Without wanting to be irreverent, this unlikely utterance augments the somewhat frivolous surface meaning of the whole wedding story:

At a rural wedding celebration a crisis emerges when the merry guests realise that they have finished all the wine. Fortunately, Jesus saves the day by miraculously producing more drink for consumption, although admittedly quite reluctantly and only at the nagging of his assertive mother. Luckily, all is well that ends well because the quality of the wine is excellent and the disciples believe.

Put this way, this is hardly a scenario comparable to the majestic scene on the Mount of Transfiguration, and yet this is how John launches the description of Jesus’ world-changing ministry, and at this “unglamorous” event Jesus does perform a spectacular miracle that – we are told – does reveal his glory and does
generate faith in his disciples. As such, this ambivalent story captures an essential aspect of John’s interpretation of the Transfiguration: transfiguring moments are not restricted to mountain tops, and while they may not carry the splendour that Peter, John and James experienced on the holy mountain, they are no less divine in that they do reveal God’s glory and thus do transform lives. In this sense, John’s presentation of Jesus’ glory at the wedding at Cana is reminiscent of the interpretation of the Transfiguration by those commentators (reviewed earlier) who highlighted as the main lesson of the scene the metamorphosis of the divine form into the human form rather than the other way round, and the descent from the mountain rather than the ascent onto the mountain. After all, the road from the top of the Mount of Transfiguration led straight to Calvary.

The last day of the Feast of Tabernacles

It was mentioned before that many scholars believe that the Transfiguration took place during the Feast of Tabernacles,\(^91\) and drawing on Harald Riesenfeld’s pioneering research into the Jewish roots of the Feast, Andreopoulos presents an elaborate argument to support the hypothesis that the actual event described in the Synoptic Gospels corresponded to the final day of the festival.\(^92\) In John’s Gospel we find that a considerable chunk of the events reported also took place at the Festival of Tabernacles/Booths (7:10–10:21), and most of these happened “On the last day of the festival, the great day” (7:37). What makes this seeming coincidence noteworthy is that it is exactly at this point in John’s Gospel that Jesus famously declares that he is the “light of the world” (already cited in the section on light). That is, on the last day of the Festival, the Synoptics present Jesus radiating divine light and John presents Jesus declaring he is the divine light. In the Synoptic accounts Jesus forbids his disciples to talk about their experience, whereas in John’s Gospel Jesus’ testimony

\(^{91}\) Cf. e.g. Ratzinger, Jesus, 306; Ramsey, Glory and Transfiguration, 115.

\(^{92}\) Andreopoulos, Metamorphosis, 57-60.
is challenged by the Pharisees because, as they claim, it was made on his own behalf, without any witnesses. To this Jesus responds:

Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. … In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.” (8:14, 17–18).

A remarkable aspect of this response is that the Transfiguration scene offers a visual parallel and confirmation of Jesus’ testimony: (a) On the Mount of Transfiguration Jesus testified on his own behalf that he is the light of the world by displaying the dazzling glory, (b) which had been his where he had come from (see John 17:5, 24) and he also knew where he was going (as evidenced by his conversation with Moses and Elijah concerning his departure); (c) the Father testified on his behalf from the shining cloud; (d) and, to satisfy the Pharisee’s legal expectations, two witnesses also appear on the holy mountain: Moses and Elijah. In this sense, the scene that took place on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles on the Mount of Transfiguration is a compact visual summary of Jesus’ testimony delivered on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem.

According to John’s Gospel, Jesus’ testimony was not accepted by the disbelieving Pharisees and they drove Jesus out of the Temple. In response, Jesus proved that he was indeed the “light of the world” by opening the eyes of someone who was born blind (9:1–12). To underscore that this unprecedented miracle was directly related to his previous testimony, he reiterated, “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (vv. 4–5). Then to demonstrate that the light he brings to people is not only sensory but also spiritual, he sought out the formerly blind man again, who, upon seeing Jesus, believed and worshipped him (vv. 38–39). Jesus then declared, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind” (v. 39).
Paul

The Apostle Paul did not play any part in the Transfiguration, but he had a prominent transformational experience on the road to Damascus that turned the main persecutor of Christianity into one of the main promoters of Christianity. This conversion is recorded in Acts three times (in chs. 9, 22 and 26), and similar to the three Synoptic accounts of the Transfiguration, although the versions show some variation, they convey the same basic scenario. This scenario, in turn, bears a strong resemblance with the scene on the Mount of Transfiguration on some key points. First and foremost, Paul was enveloped in a “light from heaven, brighter than the sun” (Acts 26:13) and then he heard a heavenly voice addressing him. Also, similar to the disciples on the holy mountain, Paul fell to the ground and was told by Jesus to get up. Unlike the Transfiguration, however, after the theophany had ended, things did not get back to “normal”: Paul could not see because of the “brightness of that light” (22:11; interestingly, the Greek word translated by the NRSV as “brightness” is δόξα, whose primary meaning is “glory”) and he recovered his sight only three days later when Ananias was instructed by the Lord to pray for him.

Thus, Paul’s transformational experience shares with the Transfiguration the exposure to divine light as a key element in the metamorphosis and, more generally, an emphasis on the visual and “seeing” throughout the whole episode:

(a) Paul saw the bright light from heaven.

(b) Afterwards he “could not see because of the brightness of that light” (22:11).

(c) Jesus told Paul,

I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (26:16–18).
(d) In Damascus the Lord told Ananias “in a vision” (9:10) that Saul was praying “and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight” (9:12).

(e) Ananias laid hands on Paul and said,

“Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized.” (9:17–18)

(f) Ananias then told Paul, “The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard” (22:14–15).

This list shows that “seeing” was central to every part of Paul’s spiritual transfiguration process, and Jesus’ words to Paul, cited in point (c) above, make it explicit that seeing in this context had a strong spiritual dimension. Indeed, by sending Paul to the Gentiles to “open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light” (26:18), Jesus was commissioning the Apostle to do exactly what he himself demonstrated in Jerusalem on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles (discussed above), when he opened the blind man’s eyes so that he could see and then believe (John 9:1–39). It is also made clear – see points (c) and (f) – that the transfiguring experience was not the function of seeing merely the divine light but seeing Jesus as well, and thus parallels the vision of seeing Jesus in his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. Finally, it is noteworthy that Jesus instructs Paul to “testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you” (26:16), which implies that the essence of the divine material Paul is to preach comes in a visual form.

Transfiguration versus conversion

While the similarities between the theophanies on the Mount of Transfiguration and the Damascus Road show obvious parallels, there is one basic difference between the two episodes: on the holy mountain God’s glory was revealed to people who already believed in Jesus whereas Paul was not only no follower of Jesus but was in fact one of his fiercest opponents when he beheld the divine light. Therefore, unlike for Peter, John and James, Paul’s experience involved
conversion and commissioning, and was in this sense reminiscent of the commissioning of Ezekiel (chs. 1–3)\textsuperscript{93}: He saw the “likeness of the glory of the LORD” (1:28), which looked like a human form with “fire enclosed all around” (v 27) and “Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendour all around” (v 28). When Ezekiel saw this vision, he fell on his face and he heard a divine voice saying, “O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. . . . I am sending you to the people of Israel…” (2:1–2).

Thus, Paul’s conversion to Christianity shows clear parallels with the Transfiguration scene, whose details Paul will have heard from Peter when they first met, and as a well-educated Pharisee, Paul will have also been aware of the similarities with Ezekiel’s vision. On the basis of these apostolic and biblical correspondences, Paul came to associate the believers’ transformation in general with an exposure to the glory of the Lord,\textsuperscript{94} viewing “glory” as a transcendental reality rather than merely a metaphor for God’s majesty. Significantly, in his letters Paul repeatedly links “glory” with Jesus; for example, in Philippians 3:21 he speaks of Christ’s “body of glory,” in 1 Corinthians 2:8 he refers to Christ as the “Lord of glory,” in 2 Corinthians 4:4 he speaks of the gospel as the “gospel of Christ’s glory” and in Colossians 1:27 the Gentiles’ receiving Christ is described as “the hope of glory.” Thus, built on his transfiguration experience, Paul came to associate with “glory” a transformational experience that can be achieved by humans through beholding Jesus, who is the image of God. This transcendental link between the Father and the Son is confirmed at the beginning of Hebrews (1:3): “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.” Segal summarises Paul’s overall approach to conversion as follows:

For Paul, as for the earliest Jewish mystics, to be privileged to see the Kavod or Glory (doxa) of God is a prologue to transformation into his image (eikōn). Paul does not say that all Christians have made the journey literally but compares the experience of knowing Christ to being allowed into the intimate presence of the Lord. We do know that he himself has made that journey.\textsuperscript{95}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[93] Segal, Paul, 9.
\item[94] Cf. Lee, Transfiguration, 86.
\item[95] Segal, Paul, 60-1.
\end{footnotes}
The nature of this transformation process is most clearly described by Paul in Chapters 3–4 of his second epistle to the Corinthians, to which we turn now.

2 Corinthians 3:13 – 4:6

In Chapters 3–4 of 2 Corinthians, Paul devotes an extended passage (3:7–4:6) to contrast his own ministry – the “ministry of the Spirit” or “the ministry of justification” – with the ministry of Moses – “the ministry of death” or the “ministry of condemnation” (2 Cor. 3:8, 9). What is important from the perspective of this dissertation is that in this passage Paul’s emphasis is not on appraising the Law or comparing the old and the new covenants but, quite remarkably, on the glory transmitted by the two ministries. What is more (and in line with what was said above), he does not talk about glory in a metaphorical sense to illuminate God’s majesty but in a very real, physical sense as the light shining in Moses’ face that Moses had to put a veil on “to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside” (3:13). The physical veil over the face, in turn, lead to a spiritual veil over the mind: in verse 15 Paul declares about the Israelites that “to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds” (NIV: “hearts”). In contrast, “when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed” (v. 16), implying that through Jesus we can have a direct access to God’s glory, as happened to the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration and to him on the road to Damascus. After this introduction, two verses follow that have become some of the best-known verses of the New Testament because they touch upon the core of Paul’s teaching:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (3:17–18)

What Paul presents here is nothing less than a concise “anatomy” of human transfiguration, and he uses the same Greek word – metamorphosis (μεταμορφώσεως) – as Mark and Matthew used for the transfiguration of Jesus on the holy mountain. This cannot be a coincidence as this verb is very rare (besides these three examples

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96 Ibid., 112.
there is only one other occurrence of it in the whole of the NT (in Romans 12:2), and therefore its use here indicates Paul’s conviction that by turning to Jesus one can experience a metamorphosis similar to what the Lord demonstrated on the Mount of Transfiguration. This is obviously a key aspect of Paul’s overall teaching, which explains why he reiterates this point in the next six verses in two different ways: first, in verse 4:4, he makes a direct reference to the devil, pointing out that his strategy to keep unbelievers in bondage is to veil the light of God’s glory: “In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” Second, in 4:6, without directly referring to the Transfiguration story, Paul uses imagery parallel to Jesus’ shining face on the Mount of Transfiguration when he concludes, “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Reflecting on this verse, Segal concludes that Paul’s “apostolate, which he expresses as a prophetic calling, is to proclaim that the face of Christ is the Glory of God;”’ the theophany on the Mount of Transfiguration offers a profound multisensory confirmation of this proclamation.

**THE TRANSFIGURATION IN WESTERN CHRISTIANITY**

We have seen in the overview above that the Transfiguration presents us with one of the most powerful scenes in the New Testament: not only does it involve Jesus radiating divine glory, but it also includes an unprecedented appearance of two Old Testament heroes in New Testament times as well as God the Father himself addressing the disciples. These events were duly recorded by all the three Synoptic Gospels, placing the scene at a strategic point within Jesus’ earthly ministry, and we also saw that the Synoptic narratives allude to some of the most profound themes in the Bible. Finally, upon exploring any possible links between the Transfiguration and three strands of NT writings – Petrine, Johannine and Pauline – we identified several likely textual and theological connections. It is therefore

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genuinely surprising to realise that post-patristic Western Christianity has by and large ignored the Transfiguration. This is not a partisan or extreme view but reflects the commonly shared understanding of scholars who have written on the subject— to cite one representative opinion, Dorothy Lee for example concludes, “Given its dramatic and theological import, it is strange that the transfiguration should be one of the most neglected stories in the New Testament. This neglect is confined largely to the Western tradition.”

Let us look at some telling examples of this lack of attention.

A good illustration of the neglect of the Transfiguration is that within a recent SPCK textbook series on Exploring the New Testament, the volume on The Gospels and Acts does not mention the Transfiguration at all, even though one of the authors, David Wenham, has done research and published on the topic. Neither do we find the Transfiguration as a term in the index of McGrath’s comprehensive Christian Theology, even though five other terms starting with “trans-” are listed (transcendence, transfinalization, transfunctionalism, transignification and transubstantiation). Looking further, neither Routledge’s recent Encyclopedia of Christian Theology, nor Eerdman’s Encyclopedia of Christianity contain an entry on the Transfiguration, although the latter does include an entry on the “Transfiguration of the World”. Another telling illustration is the interdenominational Christian website www.sermonindex.net, which stores over 17,000 “classical vintage sermons” in text, audio and video forms, categorized under over 3,100 topics without any mention of the “Transfiguration”.

And to take a final example, James Dunn’s recent overview of New Testament

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99 Lee, Transfiguration, 1.


101 Wenham and Moses, “Reputed pillars.”


Theology, which offers a summary of a lifetime’s work by one of the most influential NT scholars, again completely omits the topic.

The above examples are admittedly randomly selected and some other overviews do mention the topic, yet they do demonstrate that the Transfiguration is at best a secondary theme in modern Western Christian thought, and this limited interest is also true of church practice. Although the Early Church did recognise its importance, after the Reformation the Transfiguration was largely overlooked by Protestant theology, to the extent that the Church of England’s first English Prayer Book, published in 1549, completely ignored it on the grounds that it was not sufficiently important or central to Jesus’ life. As Rob Marshall summarises, the first time that a Prayer Book of the Church of England printed a Collect, Epistle and Gospel of the Transfiguration was only in the 1928 Prayer Book revision. In the Catholic church, after the Hungarian army successfully stopped the Ottoman invasion of the Balkans in 1546, in celebration of the victory the Transfiguration was elevated to a Feast day to be celebrated on August 6th. Yet, the Transfiguration theme has not acquired a prominent place in the mainstream liturgy of any Western denomination and there are few well-known hymns about the topic. As a result, it remains largely ignored in the life of the church and most ordinary churchgoers either do not know about the events on the holy mountain or do not see their significance and meaning.

How can we explain this curious situation? An important part of the answer is that what happened on the Mount of Transfiguration does not seem to fit in with the way Western Christianity has thought about salvation history over the past five hundred years. This has been explicitly acknowledged by Michael Ramsey, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, whose overview on the topic – which he himself esteemed very highly – is representative of mainstream 20th century Protestant theology: “The Transfiguration does not belong to the central core of the Gospel. The apostolic Kerygma did not, so far as we know, include it; and it

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107 Marshall, Transfiguration, 5.
108 Ibid., 5.
109 Ibid., 6.
would be hard for Christians to claim that the salvation of mankind could not be wrought without it." Indeed, the Transfiguration of Jesus is not mentioned in either the Nicene or the Apostle’s Creed and as Jürgen Moltmann explains, Western Christianity has attached relatively little importance to the event because of the “one-sided emphasis” placed on God’s kingdom and the associated judicial and moral categories (this question will be further discussed in the next chapter when looking at similar concerns with regard to the perception of “beauty”). Furthermore, besides the lack of any apparent moral and practical lessons to be learnt from the Transfiguration, some commentators of the Synoptics also argued that it “logically and theologically, seems out of place in the middle of Jesus’ public life.” As a result, the relatively small amount of modern scholarship that has targeted the topic has almost exclusively focused on possible backgrounds or sources for the Transfiguration or on literary dependencies among various documents containing the story, rather than on its overall meaning and significance.

THE TRANSFIGURATION IN ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

The neglect of the Transfiguration in post-patristic Western Christianity becomes particularly conspicuous when we realise that this is far from being the case in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Although Eastern Christianity grew out of the same biblical and patristic roots as its Western counterpart, it took a strikingly different approach to the appraisal of the Transfiguration: the Feast of Transfiguration has been celebrated in the East since the sixth century and it is among the twelve great church festivals, with its commemoration taking a place of equal rank with Christmas, Epiphany, Ascension and Pentecost, yielding in importance only to Easter. Indeed, Andreopoulos states that in most Orthodox churches the icon of the Transfiguration can be found in the top tier of the iconostasis, which is the

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110 Ibid., 144.
111 Moltmann, Theology of Play, 39.
112 Ashton, Fourth Gospel, 500-1.
113 Cf. Lee, Jesus’ Transfiguration, 2.
114 Ramsey, Glory and Transfiguration, 128.
level dedicated to the most important feasts of the year.\textsuperscript{115} So, what do Orthodox Christians see in the Transfiguration that their Western counterparts are missing? There is no doubt about the answer: the “uncreated” or “divine light” radiated by Jesus. Because the key to understanding the full theological significance of the Eastern perception of light lies in the hesychast tradition within Orthodox spirituality, let us briefly look at the nature of this movement before we consider the Eastern notion of “uncreated light”.

**Hesychasm**

“Hesychasm” is derived from the Greek term ἡσυχία (ἡσυχία), meaning “stillness, silence,” and refers to an ascetic monastic movement within the Eastern Orthodox church that is centred around unceasing prayer. The origin of the practice can be traced back as far as the fourth century desert fathers in Egypt, but the somewhat disparate monastic prayer traditions of the Byzantine world were synthesised into a coherent theology only in the 14\textsuperscript{th} century, primarily by Gregory Palamas, himself a hesychast. In accordance with Jesus’ teaching that “whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret” (Matt 6:6), the hesychasts withdrew to secluded places as hermits or to monasteries as monks, and devoted most of their time to following Paul’s exhortation to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17). A great deal of the actual prayers involved reciting the “Jesus prayer,” whose classic version – “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner” – is taken from the pleading of the blind beggar in Luke 18:38 (“Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me”) and of the tax collector in Luke 18:13 (“God, be merciful to me, a sinner”).\textsuperscript{116} Through their ascetic and contemplative prayer life the hesychasts sought to enter a state of communion with God, during which time they sometimes experienced a radiant divine light. This was not a widely published practice but one that was passed from elder to novice in the quiet secrecy of their seclusion, and the first explicit

\textsuperscript{115} Andreopoulos, Metamorphosis, 64.

\textsuperscript{116} Nes, Uncreated Light, 97.
exposition of the mystical “light experience” is known to us in the writings of St. Simeon the New Theologian (949–1022).

The significance of Hesychasm in the Eastern Orthodox church is paramount as it forms the spiritual gravity of the Orthodox belief system. Many of the foremost Orthodox theologians have come from this tradition and, as we will see below, when Hesychasm was publicly challenged in the 14th century, this quiet tradition that had not generally been known until then to people uninitiated in its monastic practice, became an official doctrine of the Orthodox church.\textsuperscript{117} Ever since the 14th century, monasticism has remained the classical form of the spiritual life of Orthodoxy,\textsuperscript{118} counterbalancing the worldly engagements of the church and “reminding Christians that the kingdom of God is not of this world.”\textsuperscript{119} It is because of the centrality of the monastic experience in guiding the Orthodox church that Eastern Christianity displays a relatively homogeneous spiritual character in spite of its geographical diversity.

Lossky explains that attaining communion with God requires constant ascetic effort and discipline on the part of the hesychasts in order to withstand earthly temptations, to liberate themselves from vices and to develop virtues. Thus, in preparation for the mystic union with God, the hesychast’s human nature must undergo a change: it must be “transfigured by grace in the way of sanctification, which has a range which is not only spiritual but also bodily.”\textsuperscript{120} And this is the point where the Transfiguration becomes highly relevant: in Orthodox spirituality the transfiguration of Jesus Christ is seen as a model for the transfiguration of humanity, and accordingly, as the ultimate aim for the hesychasts’ contemplative life. When in the 14th century Gregory Palamas and other Byzantine theologians turned Hesychasm into a coherent theological system, they used the Transfiguration as the chief biblical anchor: according to the Orthodox doctrines, on the holy mountain Christ showed his disciples the deified state to which all humans are called and the hesychasts’ perception of the uncreated light can be

\textsuperscript{117} Andreopoulos, Metamorphosis, 63.
\textsuperscript{118} Lossky, Mystical Theology, 17.
\textsuperscript{119} Timothy Ware, The Orthodox Church (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 45.
\textsuperscript{120} Lossky, Mystical Theology, 18.
seen as a proof – and an eschatological sign – that the union with God can be experienced in glimpses by the righteous even in this life.\textsuperscript{121}

\textbf{“Uncreated light”}

In the fourteenth century Hesychasm was openly challenged by some Byzantine theologians led by Barlaam of Calabria, an Abbot who had been trained in Western scholastic theology, resulting in a full-scale theological debate (the “Hesychast controversy”) that involved the whole leadership of the Byzantine Church and Empire in six successive Synods between 1341 and 1351. The hesychasts’ cause was taken up by Gregory Palamas, and although at one point during the debate he was imprisoned, in the end Palamas’ views were fully exonerated and were established as the doctrine of the Orthodox church. Curiously, almost the entire debate revolved around one question: whether the light of the Transfiguration was “created” or “uncreated”. What was the significance of this distinction?

Let us begin to answer this far-reaching question with some basic observations. First, radiant, divine light associated with God’s glory in some form of theophany appears in the Bible in several places; one expressive example is given by the prophet Habakkuk:

\begin{quote}
God came from Teman,
the Holy One from Mount Paran.
His glory covered the heavens,
and the earth was full of his praise.
The brightness was like the sun;
rays came forth from his hand,
where his power lay hidden. (Hab 3:3–4)
\end{quote}

We also saw earlier the significance attached to light in the New Testament in Johannine and Pauline writing, and Eastern Orthodox theology used these foundations to build a coherent “theology of light”: in accordance with the converging views of several church fathers (e.g. Gregory Nazianzus, Cyril of Alexandria, Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus) as well as subsequent orthodox theologians such as Symeon the New Theologian, Gregory Palamas argued that the various biblical descriptions of divine light refer to the same

\textsuperscript{121} Nes, \textit{Uncreated Light}, 45.
manifestation of God’s glory as the “uncreated” light that appeared on Moses’ face on Mount Sinai, on Stephen’s face before his martyrdom, in Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus and, most importantly, on Jesus’ face and clothes at the Transfiguration. In the Parable of the Weeds, Jesus stated that after his return in glory, “the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt 13:43) and – as we saw above when we considered Hesychasm – the unique aspect of Orthodox spirituality is the belief that this teaching may apply to the righteous even in their earthly lives as they experience the shining light as a tangible reality of their communion with God.

The experience of the divine light is real and physical; there are many written records of it, and by way of illustration I have included in Appendix A a selection of personal accounts by a range of witnesses, from fifth century desert father Arsenius the Great to 20th century Greek hesychast Elder Joseph. Following these extracts, Appendix B presents a more detailed description of the relevant parts of a famous conversation between the 19th century Orthodox Elder, St. Seraphim of Sarov, and his disciple, Nicholas Motovilov, during which the Elder’s face “became radiant” with an “ineffable glow of light” emanating from him. These examples attest to Andreopoulos’s general observation that virtually all the ascetics who have had the experience of the light describe it in very similar ways and they also connect it, in one way or another, with the Transfiguration of Christ. This is also reflected by the fact that we often find in Orthodox writings the term “Taboric light” – named after Mount Tabor in Galilee, which has traditionally been associated with the Mount of Transfiguration in the Orthodox church – as a synonym for “uncreated light” when discussing the hesychastic mystical experience.

In sum, the Orthodox understanding is that – in accordance with John’s (1:4–5) teaching – the Incarnation brought light into the darkness of the world and at the Transfiguration the disciples’ eyes were opened so that for a short while they could behold this divine light with their earthly eyes. And following their example, other righteous people could get glimpses of the divine light as part of their own

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122 Lossky, Mystical Theology, 222.
123 For detailed bibliographic details about this meeting and the records preserving it, see Appendix B.
124 Andreopoulos, Metamorphosis, 21.
transfiguration process. Thus, for Eastern spirituality the significance of the divine light is paramount: as Lossky points out, all the liturgical texts are impregnated with references to it, and the spiritual richness of the Christian East cannot be separated from the mystic perception of light as the experience of God, because this provides “that inner warmth which rightly represents an intimate quality of Orthodox piety.” Still the question remains: why was it important to emphasise that this light was “uncreated”?

The significance of referring to the light as “uncreated” lies in the fact that in this way it can be directly associated with the transcendent God (through his “energy”, according to Orthodox belief). Scripture says that “God is light” (1 John 1:5), and the hesychasts believed that the light that accompanied their mystical experiences was “not a vision of some created light, but of the light of the Godhead Itself – the same Light of the Godhead which surrounded Christ on Mount Thabor.” The stakes are high because if this belief is valid, then the hesychasts’ experience of light – that is, “the perception of the grace in which God makes Himself known to those who enter into union with Him by transcending the limits of created being” – can be seen as a direct partaking in God and can thus legitimately form a spiritual core of Christian belief. Therefore, the debate about “created” and “uncreated” light concerned, ultimately, the fundamental question of what role human sensory experience should play in forming theological doctrine. Barlaam and Palamas’s dispute could thus be seen as a dispute between two very different types of theology, one rooted in Western scholastic principles, the other in Eastern mystical experiences. The different roots taken by East and West are reflected in their respective appraisals of the Transfiguration: in the East it took spiritual pride of place, while in the West it became gradually sidelined.

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126 Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 78.
SUMMARY

The Transfiguration did not have a direct role in the unfolding of events leading to the Cross – this was confirmed by Jesus himself who forbade the three participating disciples to talk about it until after the Resurrection. This was an experience primarily for the eyes, which was later confirmed by Jesus himself when he instructed the disciples to tell no one about what they had “seen” (Mark 9:9) rather than heard (even though they heard God’s own voice); Matthew (17:9) makes this point even more explicit when he records Jesus’ instruction as “Tell no one about the vision…” Thus, instead of offering any explicit lessons that could have been verbalised, the scene on the holy mountain with its multisensory manifestations presented a transcendental experience that was as close to “heaven on earth” as mortals were likely to experience; Peter, John and James were chosen to witness a divine revelation of Jesus in heavenly glory with clear signposting that this was indeed directly from the God of Israel. That is, they were allowed to “see” the Son of God in his real form. Why? The Bible does not give any direct explanation, but we can imagine the effect: Given that on the road to Damascus, exposure to the divine light turned the Christian-hater Saul into the Apostle Paul, and in the Eastern world the experience of the divine light by a small number of ascetic hermits and monks shaped the nature of an entire region’s Christian development, the glorious scene on the holy mountain undoubtedly had a profound transfigurational impact on the three witnessing disciples; this was the final component in their spiritual coming of age and prepared them for what was to come.

Figure 77. Christ in Glory by Leonid Ouspensky; 1984, collection of J. Van Joris

Figure 78. The Hand of God within rays of uncreated light (detail from the Transfiguration apse mosaic in Figure 81); 6th c., Sant’Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna, Italy
How shall we, modern readers of the Bible, interpret the Transfiguration? And perhaps more importantly, how does the Transfiguration interpret us? The chasm between East and West shows that Christian believers can differ considerably in what they make of the events on the Mount of Transfiguration, to the extent that many Western commentators do not accept that the scene occurred in the form it is described and thus they see only a symbolic meaning in the events. This was, in fact, one of the main issues that Gregory Palamas faced during the 14th century “Hesychast controversy” regarding the uncreated light; as Ouspensky explains, Palamas argued fiercely against the symbolic perception of the “Taboric light” by the 14th century “humanists,” because this perception inevitably gave the Lord’s Transfiguration an unreal, symbolic character in their eyes. This, in turn, prevented them from understanding or accepting the Orthodox spiritual experience represented by the hesychasts and the hesychastic belief that through the purification of mind and heart people might be sanctified by the divine, uncreated light. And so, in reply to his critics, Palamas asked: “What? Neither Elias nor Moses were really there since they too were used as symbols? ... and the mountain was no real mountain because it is also symbolic of the ascent to virtue?”128 And elsewhere he expanded:

So, when all the saints agree in calling this light true divinity, how do you dare to consider it alien to the divinity, calling it “a created reality” and “a symbol of divinity” and claiming that it is inferior to our intellection?129

In conclusion, Lossky is in all probability right when he points out that the perception of the Transfiguration is more than a question of scholastic subtlety: it concerns some fundamental questions of theology, such as “the nature of grace, the possibility of mystical experience and the reality of this experience, the possibility of seeing God and the nature of this vision, and finally, the possibility of deification in the real and not the metaphorical sense of this word.”130 And while we may not know exactly how the Transfiguration answers these theological

128 Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon* (vol. 2; Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992), 240.
questions, here is what we do know: Scripture says that on the Mount of
Transfiguration the disciples’ eyes were opened to the reality of the transcendental
dimension of God’s creation, and that God the Father himself confirmed that
access to this heavenly sphere is through his Son, Jesus Christ. It is within this
context that we can appreciate the emphasis in John’s Gospel on Jesus being the
“light of the world” and understand why 2 Peter cited the Transfiguration
experience as the ultimate confirmation of the promise of the Parousia. And it is
also this background which illuminates Paul’s conversion experience when he was
confronted with the Light of the World and his subsequent conviction that
believers’ are transformed by beholding the glory and light of Jesus. And finally,
this gives us keys to understanding why when the hesychasts experienced God’s
glorious light in their personal piety, they associated it with the “uncreated light”
of the Transfiguration and built their theology around it.

Figure 81. An unusual depiction of the Transfiguration is the 6th c. apse mosaic of
Sant’Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna, Italy: Christ is represented by a golden cross on a starry
blue background with his bust in the centre (see Figure 83); flanking the cross against a
backdrop of golden sky and clouds lit by rays of uncreated light are Moses and Elijah, with
the Hand of God appearing in the top (see Figure 75); Peter, James and John are
represented by lambs.
2. Beauty

“The beautiful in God is what makes us rejoice in him.”

(Jürgen Moltmann\(^{131}\))

On the Mount of Transfiguration, upon experiencing the visible manifestation of God’s glory Peter exclaimed, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here” (Mark 9:5). What did Peter mean by “good”? It is unlikely that he used the word in the everyday sense of “fine,” “pleasant” or “enjoyable,” because in the verse immediately following this exclamation we are told that he was terrified. The Greek word translated as “good,” καλός, could mean both “good” and “beautiful,” and some scholars argue that the Greek translation of what Peter originally said more likely refers to the latter meaning.\(^{132}\) According to this view, what Peter tried to express was not so much a state of well-being as a state of being overwhelmed by the intensity of the divine splendour of the revelation of God’s glory that rendered him and his two companions prostrate. Thus, Lee interprets Peter’s words as follows:

Peter’s exclamation, “It is good for us to be here” (Mark 9:5) conveys a sense of the beauty of the transfiguration as well as its inherent goodness. What the transfiguration reveals is the beauty of God in the mystery of the incarnation, the splendour of divine glory and uncreated light – the beauty and glory, in other words, of revelation itself.\(^{133}\)

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition the “uncreated light” shining from Jesus’ face and clothes at the Transfiguration has traditionally been associated with an “inerrable beauty”\(^{134}\) and, in fact, beauty was considered such an important aspect of Eastern theology that the authoritative collection of hesychastic writings between the fourth and the fifteenth century was entitled \textit{Philokalia}, that is, “love of the beautiful.”\(^{135}\) The close relationship between the Transfiguration and divine

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\(^{131}\) Moltmann, \textit{Theology of Play}, 43.

\(^{132}\) Evdokimov explains that if Peter’s original word had meant “good,” a more likely translation would have been \textit{agathos} (ἀγαθός). Paul Evdokimov, \textit{The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty} (trans. Steven Bigham; Redondo Beach, Calif.: Oakwood, 1990), 2.

\(^{133}\) Lee, \textit{Transfiguration}, 129.

\(^{134}\) Ouspensky, \textit{Icon} 2, 239; see also Lossky, \textit{Vision}, 97.

\(^{135}\) Evdokimov, \textit{Icon}, 11.
beauty is also expressed in a forefeast hymn (“troparion”) associated with the Feast of Transfiguration in the Orthodox Church:

The day of holy gladness has come;  
The Lord has ascended Mount Tabor  
To radiate the beauty of His divinity.\textsuperscript{136}

The perception of divine beauty is not, however, confined to the scene on the holy mountain. As we will see below, the Scriptures contain a surprising number of references to the transcendental beauty of the Lord, one of the most expressive examples being King David’s yearning in Psalm 27:

One thing I ask from the LORD,  
this only do I seek:  
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD  
all the days of my life,  
to gaze on the beauty of the LORD  
and to seek him in his temple. (Ps 27:4)

Yet, despite the salient presence of divine beauty in the Bible, the concept is not a mainstream topic in modern theology; in his book on \textit{Beauty and Spirit}, Patrick Sherry concludes that beauty has been treated “as a Cinderella, compared with the attention paid by theologians to her two sisters, truth and goodness.”\textsuperscript{137} This concurs with Lee’s conclusion about the perception of the Transfiguration, namely that although the presence of beauty in the theophany on the holy mountain is undeniable, it has not always been taken seriously in theology, especially in those traditions which regard beauty in general “with suspicion.”\textsuperscript{138} This would suggest that Western theology’s difficulty in engaging with the Transfiguration might correlate with a more general uncertainty or unease in Western theological thinking about the way to approach the concept of divine beauty, thus forming a broader theme.

\textbf{Figure 85.} Iconostas row; 1794, St Nicholas Greek Catholic Church, Bodružal, Slovakia

\textsuperscript{136} Last accessed at \url{http://orthodoxwiki.org/Transfiguration} on 14/4/1/2011.

\textsuperscript{137} Sherry, \textit{Spirit and Beauty}, 67.

\textsuperscript{138} Lee, \textit{Transfiguration}, 126-127.
WHAT IS DIVINE BEAUTY?

The type of beauty that is of particular interest in this dissertation is not ‘created beauty,’ that is, the earthly beauty associated with the aesthetically pleasing appearance of a person, a work of art or nature, but rather ‘divine beauty,’ that is, the higher-order beauty that is associated with God himself. Although, as Umberto Eco summarises in his seminal work on art and beauty in the Middle Ages, seeing the beauty of the world as an image and reflection of Ideal Beauty is partly Platonic in origin, the concept of beauty was also discussed in medieval times by theologians because of the manifold scriptural references to the splendour of God and his handiwork, the cosmic Creation. Indeed, as Eco concludes, there was not a single medieval writer on the subject of beauty who did not describe the polyphony of the universe combined together in a marvellous unity by God’s ineffable beauty. It is to this divine beauty that we now turn.

At the end of the previous chapter on the Transfiguration we saw that many Western commentators do not accept that the scene on the holy mountain actually occurred in the form described in the Synoptic Gospels but see only a symbolic meaning in the event. In contrast, Eastern theologians such as Gregory Palamas insisted vehemently that the uncreated light seen at the Transfiguration was a real sensory experience. This question of the nature and reality of experiencing something that is transcendental in origin rises with equal acuteness when we consider the question of divine beauty. Hart, for example, argues just as fiercely as Palamas did that beauty resists reduction to the “symbolic”; as he explains, beauty lies in the immediacy of a certain splendour, radiance, mystery, or allure; it plays upon the continuous insisture of a plastic, or lyric, or organic, or metaphoric surface. A “symbol” that truly constitutes a unified and “inspired” capture of this beauty, and genuinely makes it manifest in its particularity and in its capacity to reflect more than its particularity, is a thing to be desired, even revered. But symbol as I mean it here, in the abstract, is not this, but is rather always an afterthought, a speculative appropriation of the aesthetic moment in the service of a supposedly more vital and essential meaning; the symbol is that which arrests the force of

139 Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), 17; see also Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 63, for a similar view.
140 Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 18.
the aesthetic, the continuity of the surface, in order to disclose “depths”; it suspends the aesthetic in favour of the gnoseological, in order to discover something more fundamental than whatever merely “accidental” form might manifest it.\textsuperscript{141}

Similar to Palamas’s writings, Hart’s parlance is not easy to comprehend in every detail; if I understand correctly, he considers beauty to be an immediate phenomenological experience whose fullness no symbol can capture adequately. Elsewhere, Hart talks about this elusiveness more directly when he states, “beauty possesses a phenomenal priority, an indefectible precedence over whatever response it evokes; it appears on the vastest of scales and on the most minute, at once familiar and strange, near and remote; attempts to make it obedient to a particular semantics inevitably fail, and expand uncontrollably into an ever more inexact prolixity.”\textsuperscript{142} Interestingly, in another in-depth analysis of the concept, John Milbank also highlights the limits of the conceptualisation of beauty; in his paper on “Beauty and the Soul” he states that beauty arises “where the attraction exercised by a formed reality is ineffable and escapes analysis.”\textsuperscript{143} He then explains that we speak of beauty just because we “cannot capture this attraction in a formula that would allow us to produce other instances of the beautiful.”\textsuperscript{144}

Figure 89. The five lancets under the northern rose window (see Figure 3) in Chartres Cathedral: Anne (mother of the Virgin) surrounded by Melchizedek, David, Solomon and Aaron

Both Hart and Milbank emphasise that beauty refers to an entity that is more substantial than the mere perception of aesthetic quality, as it captivates the whole person of the receiver. In order to illustrate this encompassing form of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{141} Hart, \textit{Beauty}, 24-25.
\item \textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 17.
\item \textsuperscript{144} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
engagement, Hans Urs von Balthasar uses the analogy of responding to a beautiful musical composition or painting: in this process all our senses are employed and “the whole person then enters into a state of vibration and becomes responsive space, the ‘sounding box’ of the event of beauty occurring within him.”

This sounds very much like a spiritual experience and, indeed, Oleg Bychkov confirms that it has been a common observation in aesthetic theories that the experience of beauty is somehow revelatory about the hidden principles of reality. Balthasar makes the link between the perception of beauty and the experience of spiritual revelation explicit when he continues,

And it becomes clear at once that faith in the full Christian sense can be nothing other than this: to make the whole man a space that responds to the divine content. Faith attunes man to this sound; it confers on man the ability to react precisely to this divine experiment, preparing him to be a violin that receives just this touch of the bow, to serve as material for just this house to be built, to provide the rhyme for just this verse being composed.

All the above observations point to the conclusion that although divine beauty can be perceived, it may be beyond our capacity to describe its essence in rational language, as it is related to God’s ineffable transcendental nature. When we run out of words, the most natural turn may be to worship and praise (as is common in the piety of the church); in Moltmann’s words, “On man’s side, the corresponding terms are amazement, adoration, and praise; that is, freedom which expresses itself in gratitude, enjoyment, and pleasure in the presence of beauty.”

This is perfectly illustrated by Augustine in his commentary on the Book of Psalms:

He then is “beautiful” in Heaven, beautiful on earth; beautiful in the womb; beautiful in His parents’ hands; beautiful in His miracles; beautiful under the scourge: beautiful when inviting to life; beautiful also when not regarding death: beautiful in “laying down His life;” beautiful in “taking it again;” beautiful on the Cross; beautiful in the Sepulchre; beautiful in Heaven. ... The highest beauty, the real beauty, is that of righteousness...

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145 Balthasar, Glory, 220.
147 Balthasar, Glory, 220.
Beauty, light and glory

A consistent observation about the occurrences of beauty in the Bible is that beauty is often associated with the related concepts of “light” and “glory”. We saw that the theme of light as it appears at the Transfiguration, as well as in John’s Gospel and Paul’s writings, has provided a solid basis for the patristic and subsequent Eastern theology of light, which linked the experience of light with the experience of beauty; a good biblical illustration of the interrelatedness of beauty and glory is Psalm 145, where King David calls God’s splendour “glorious” when he declares, “On the glorious splendour of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate” (Ps 145:5). In the Hebrew text, the phrase “glorious splendour of your majesty” includes the words kābōd, hādār and hōd, and the Psalmist uses the last two of these words, accompanied by tiph’ārāh (beauty), in Psalm 96:5–6: “… the LORD made the heavens. Splendour and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.”

Thus, beauty and glory appear to be interlinked as key attributes of the divine transcendence, and, in fact, the semantic domains of the two concepts overlap in Hebrew: according to Strong’s Hebrew Dictionary, kābōd can mean “splendour,” “glory” and “honour,” tiph’ārāh can mean “beauty,” “glory,” “honour” and “majesty,” and hōd and hādār can occupy exactly the same semantic domain as tiph’ārāh. The interrelatedness of the concepts of glory and beauty is also illustrated in Isaiah 28:1 and 4, where the prophet talks about Ephraim’s fading “glorious beauty,” using the word tiph’ārāh accompanied this time by tsēbîy, which again has a range of meanings, including “splendour,” “beautiful,” “glorious” and “pleasant”. Finally and most importantly, in the Book of Job, God himself names glory and beauty/splendour (hōd and hādār) as his own distinctive characteristics when he asks Job:

Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?
Deck yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendour. (Job 40:9–10)

In sum, God’s transcendent, divine presence is sensed by mortals as luminous and glorious beauty, and this is the backdrop to Moltmann’s summary that in the New Testament the Greek word for glory, doxa (δόξα), signifies “divine
honour, divine splendour, divine power, and visible divine brightness.” At this point, it is useful to ask along with Karl Barth: “What is the more precise meaning of the honour and the glory of God, of the Gloria Dei, of God as the source and radiance of light?” Barth’s answer is that it is “the self-revealing sum of all divine perfections. It is the fullness of God’s deity, the emerging, self-expressing and self-manifesting reality of all that God is.” This definition, taken together with the above examples of the use of beauty and glory in the Bible, is in accordance with Milbank’s conclusion about Balthasar’s understanding of the terms:

Given this simultaneous objectivity and subjectivity of the experience of the beautiful, we can say that to see (taking seeing as embracing all sensory and phantasmic experience) the beautiful is to see the invisible in the visible. Hans Urs von Balthasar rightly contends that the experience of “Glory” in the Bible – of a hidden divine source irradiating the finite surface – involves just this.

**Beauty, goodness and truth**

We saw above that beauty can be conceived as a perceptible manifestation of God’s glory and, because it relates to the transcendental divine, beauty has been generally seen to encompass more than a sensory experience; in Milbank’s words, “it seems that there is an excess in the experience of the beautiful … it concerns desire for the good as well as knowledge of the true.” Recognising the link between beauty, goodness and truth has been a widely accepted view in the past: we have seen above that in his commentary on the Book of Psalms Augustine identified moral beauty (“the beauty of righteousness”) as the “highest beauty” and Thomas Aquinas also spoke about the beautiful in relation to the “good,” arguing that the two concepts are essentially the same; this was taken one step further by

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152 Ibid.
his contemporary, Bonaventure, when he stated that there were four conditions for being, “namely that it be one, true, good, and beautiful,” defining beauty as “the splendour of all the transcendentals together.”\(^{156}\) In his seminal work on divine beauty – *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* – Balthasar explains that what is beautiful in the world “possesses a total dimension that also calls for moral decision”\(^{157}\) and then concludes: “May we not ... ascribe to the beautiful the same range of application and the same inwardly analogous form that we ascribe to the one, the true, the good? The traditional theology of the Church Fathers and even that of high Scholasticism did this unhesitatingly...\(^{158}\) Later he elaborates:

Psychologically, the effect of beautiful forms on the soul may be described in a great variety of ways. But a true grasp of this effect will not be attained unless one brings to bear logical and ethical concepts, concepts of truth and value ... The form as it appears to us is beautiful only because the delight that it arouses in us is founded upon the fact that, in it, the truth and goodness of the depths of reality itself are manifested and bestowed, and this manifestation and bestowal reveal themselves to us as being something infinitely and inexhaustibly valuable and fascinating.\(^{159}\)

A more concrete illustration of these abstract ideas would be the fact that upon seeing a breathtakingly beautiful scene of nature, most people would find it a real sacrilege to learn that some horrible crime had been committed in it as pure beauty and sin are incompatible. It is within this context of the ultimate unity between divine beauty, truth and goodness that the extract by Hart cited in the Introduction unfolds its full meaning: Hart contends that the power of Christian thought does not lie in the strength of its rational arguments but rather in “its appeal first to the eye and heart, as the only way it may ‘command’ assent;” then he concludes, “the church cannot separate truth from rhetoric, or from beauty.”\(^{160}\)

In the final part of this dissertation I will look at the complementary roles of “seeing” and “hearing” Scripture as an example of the correspondence of the senses like that expressed in Psalm 34 when considering “tasting” and “seeing” goodness:

O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him. (v. 8)

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\(^{156}\) Cited by Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 24.
\(^{157}\) Balthasar, *Glory*, 34.
\(^{158}\) Ibid., 38.
\(^{159}\) Ibid., 118.
Beauty and corruption

One reason why beauty has been treated suspiciously by some theological traditions is the fact that it has been seen as an entity that could be corrupted or abused. As Evdokimov states, “God is not the only one who ‘clothes himself in Beauty.’ Evil imitates him in this respect and thus makes beauty a profoundly ambiguous quality.”161 The description of the Fall in Genesis 3:6 is particularly telling in this respect: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate.” This verse leaves no doubt that sensory appeal can lead to sin. We also find in the book of Ezekiel (28:11–19) a prophecy about the King of Tyre, in which we learn that the king was “the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty” (v. 12), blameless until “iniquity” was found in him (v. 15). Alarmingly, God’s diagnosis about the root of his sin is centred around the king’s beauty: “Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendour” (v. 17). Thus, beauty not only does not offer any guarantee against corruption but can in fact actively corrupt, and it can, Evdokimov continues, “accomplish this transformation with a strange and total indifference toward Goodness and Truth.”162 Ironically, a perfect illustration of beauty’s capacity to separate itself from truth is a famous expression of the beauty–truth bond in the concluding lines of Keats’s “Ode to a Grecian Urn” from 1819:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

The problem here is, of course, that the beauty Keats refers to is already detached from God’s Creation and Spirit, and indeed, in considering another famous Romantic poem, Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” Sherry describes how the worship of beauty has frequently become a substitute for religion in secular contexts.163 He also cites the saying by American writer Tom Wolf that today art is “the religion of the educated classes,”164 as being typical of

161 Evdokimov, Icon, 38.
162 Evdokimov, Icon, 38.
163 Sherry, Spirit and Beauty, 22-23.
164 Ibid., 23.
the current zeitgeist. On a personal note, I myself have lost interest in going to art
galleries because I began to feel that they were becoming secular shrines, churches
without God. Indeed, Evdokimov explains that even Dostoevsky, who famously
believed in beauty’s capacity to potentially “save the world” noted that “Beauty is
an enigma” and that even “nihilists love beauty.” If we also consider that the
Bible is full of examples of pagan worship centring around beautifully crafted
idols, we start to see that Evdokimov’s bleak conclusion about the separation of
beauty, goodness and truth is not without substance:

   It is undeniable that the initial unity between Truth, Goodness, and Beauty
   has fallen apart. The principles which govern knowledge, ethics and
   aesthetics are no longer integrated in religious principles. Each area of
   human activity has become autonomous and thus manifests the deepest
   ambiguity.  

   According to Barth, it is exactly the secular connotation of beauty which
   made the concept an alien element for the Protestant church, “not accepted with a
   very good conscience, and always looked on and treated with a certain mistrust.”
   But while he acknowledged that the concept of the beautiful is “not at all adapted
   for introduction into the language of theology, and indeed extremely dangerous,”
   he also added:

   Has our whole consideration of the matter not brought us inevitably to the
   place where what would otherwise remain a gap in our knowledge can be
   filled only in this way ? Finally and above all, does biblical truth itself and
   as such permit us to stop at this point because of the danger, and not to say
   that God is beautiful?

   At this point we are ready to return to the issue referred to in the
   introduction of this chapter concerning the loss of beauty in some theological
   traditions, particularly in Western Protestant Christianity. In the following sections
   I will first look at the extent of this loss, and then illuminate the process by
   considering the case of sacred art.

165 Evdokimov, Icon, 39.
166 Ibid., 40.
167 Barth, Church Dogmatics II/I, 651.
168 Ibid., 651-52.
THE LOSS OF BEAUTY

Hans Urs von Balthasar is the modern theologian who has highlighted most expressively the significance of beauty in theology and the gap that the neglect of beauty has left in our biblical understanding; consequently, he built an elaborate theological framework around the concept. His “mission statement” at the beginning of his monumental enterprise is worth citing at some length:

We here attempt to develop a Christian theology in the light of the third transcendental, that is to say: to complement the vision of the true and the good with that of the beautiful (pulchrum). The introduction will show how impoverished Christian thinking has been by the growing loss of this perspective which once so strongly informed theology. It is not, therefore, our intent to yield to some whim and force theology into a little travelled side-road, but rather to restore theology to a main artery which it has abandoned. But this is in no sense to imply that the aesthetic perspective ought now to dominate theology in the place of the logical and the ethical. It is true, however, that the transcendentals are inseparable, and that neglecting one can only have a devastating effect on the others.169

What is striking about this scene-setting introduction is not only the conviction that the neglect of beauty has a “devastating effect” and leads to “impoverished Christian thinking,” but that Balthasar also links this neglect to a loss of “a main artery” that theology had originally possessed but later abandoned. In many ways, the blockage of this artery is at the heart of this dissertation, because besides explaining Western theology’s ambivalent relationship to beauty, it also sheds light on its inability to assign the Transfiguration its due importance. Furthermore, as I will try to show in Part 3 of the dissertation, this blocked artery may also have a direct bearing on the contemporary practice of biblical interpretation.

When did the loss occur? Most scholars addressing this issue point to the Reformation era as the time when symptoms of this loss became apparent, but with a shift of this magnitude the changes are unlikely to have happened from one moment to another but rather were rooted in earlier times. Some key tensions in this respect already surfaced in the outbreaks of Byzantine iconoclasm in the eighth century and the reservations expressed about sacred imagery were not restricted to the East; for example, the Council of Frankfurt (794) and the Synod of

169 Balthasar, Glory, 9.
Paris (824) declared that images “only serve an ornamental purpose and that it is completely unimportant whether Christians have them or not: ‘Christ did not save us by paintings.’”\(^{170}\) Another example of pre-Reformation prejudice against some aspects of art in Western Christianity was the twelfth century campaign by the Cistercians and the Carthusians against superfluous and over-luxuriant art in church decoration, which was felt to be out of keeping with the sacred nature of its environment and could be seen as “wondrous though perverse delight.”\(^ {171}\)

The study of the process of change (regrettably) goes beyond the scope of this dissertation; instead, let us look at how scholars characterised the manifestation of the loss. As already cited, Sherry characterised beauty as the Cinderella of the three sisters of Truth, Goodness and Beauty, and explained this situation in terms of Western theology’s predominant concern with doctrine and ethics and the accompanying “intellectualization of religion in recent centuries.”\(^ {172}\) Arguing in a similar vein, Moltmann highlighted the growing emphasis on “judicial and moral categories” in the Western church (especially in Protestantism) that has resulted in a “one-sided emphasis on the dominion of God.”\(^ {173}\) As a result, he continues, Karl Barth was the only theologian in the continental Protestant tradition who has dared to call God “beautiful.”\(^ {174}\) According to Ramsey, the change was also linked to the shift of emphasis from the Gospels to the Pauline Epistles and the growing distrust of mysticism.\(^ {175}\)

Although these characterisations are obviously broadly sketched, they point to a basic paradigm shift emerging with the Reformation. At the level of church practice, this paradigm shift manifested itself after the Reformation by the gradual disappearance of artistic images from the Protestant churches and an increased importance attached to preaching and “hearing the word.” As William Dyrness summarises, the general tendency in most churches in England in the 16\(^ {th}\) century was to replace painted images with scriptural verses painted on the walls and altar

\(^{172}\) Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 21.
\(^{174}\) Ibid, 38.
\(^{175}\) Ramsey, *Glory and Transfiguration*, 140.
cloths, and the 1580 ban of all biblical images in Geneva had a strong impact even on Bible illustrations: the remaining images were not “works of art” but rather illustrations of the texts, working in tandem with the words of Scripture, which had priority. I will look at the changing role of “art” in the next section in more detail, but Dyrness’s conclusion is very relevant here:

Lying behind this of course are the theological convictions that the transcendent God is mediated only by a faithful (and internal) appropriation of Scripture. It is through the word, read, preached and heard, that the saving truth of God’s love is brought home to the hearts of the hearer by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Art, when it is allowed, is subordinated to this much more important work.

Thus, the loss of beauty was undoubtedly related to the Reformation’s new appropriation of the Bible, resulting in what Dyrness called an overall “Scripture culture.” This move went hand in hand with the emergence of a “sermon culture,” characterised by sermons becoming not just the primary spiritual but also the primary cultural and political experience of many people. The pride of place of worship was given to the sermon and, as Dunn explains, the model of the Christian preacher became the Old Testament prophet. In Elizabethan London, popular preachers were known to attract larger crowds every week than even the plays of William Shakespeare or Ben Jonson. These changes illustrate that the Reformation heralded a new era of the superiority of the abstract word over the visual experience: “the ear was more to be trusted than the eye.” This trend grew beyond the Protestant tradition and over the next centuries pervaded much of the theology of Western Christianity: beauty was increasingly seen as colliding with intellectual substance and losing out in this confrontation. Jeremy Begbie’s summary is very accurate in this respect:

Certainly, the arts have played a massive part in the story of Christianity, and, for centuries, the arts have been recognised as powerful theological interpreters. However, especially in the last two or three centuries, theology

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177 Ibid., 224.
179 Ibid., 228.
180 Dunn, New Testament Theology, 82.
182 Ibid., 228.
which I am here taking to mean ‘faith seeking deeper wisdom’ – has been wary of allowing the arts very much room. It has typically been dazzled by a kind of intellectualism, where the mind is effectively divorced from other parts of our humanity and forced to work at a high level of abstraction with a very restricted set of tools.  

**Beauty and Art**

The previous section has illustrated that it is virtually impossible to talk about beauty without shifting at one point to the discussion of (visual) art. This interdependence is partly due to the fact that in our current times the official locus of beauty is the well-defined area of “art,” and our modern society is well equipped to deal with the spiritual-like experience of aesthetic pleasure: as already mentioned, museums and art galleries function as quasi-churches that are served by well-trained priests: art historians and art critics. But art does not necessarily need to be secular. We learn in Exodus that in order to enable Bezalel to prepare the various parts of the Tabernacle, God filled him “with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft” (Ex 31:3–4). This has been seen as a key passage for the discipline of theological aesthetics, because it shows that human art has its roots in God, and therefore can reflect divine beauty.

Despite the close connections between divine beauty and beautiful art, the two are not the same, so much so that Orthodox icons, for example, can be beautiful from a divine perspective and ugly from an aesthetic one. Unfortunately, space is too limited here to address in detail questions of art’s relationship to divine beauty; however, I would like to at least touch upon some core issues by comparing Eastern icons and Western sacred art, because this contrast highlights some basic dilemmas about the essence of art and its relationship to faith.

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Eastern icons and Western sacred art

We saw briefly above in the discussion of the loss of beauty that the question of artistic imagery became a problem issue in the Reformation era. A more detailed analysis could have explored the contention in this respect between Protestantism and Catholicism, with the latter being far more tolerant and supportive of art; however, even this major difference within Western Christianity seems to be far less pronounced than the more salient and fundamental contrast between Eastern and Western sacred art in this respect. Thus, the basic tension that I would like to address here goes beyond the important issue as to whether art is augmenting our spiritual understanding or has a distracting, and perhaps even seductive, effect, a question that was already addressed head-on by Augustine in his *Confessions* and resurfaced under different guises over the centuries, including the purging of churches of their artistic decoration during the Reformation. The East-West tension also goes beyond the contrast between the concepts of “internal” and “external” beauty, with the former representing the ascetic contemplation of the beauty of the soul (promoted, for example, by the Cistercians in the West) and the latter the appreciation of the aesthetically gratifying ornaments of external beauty. While these contrast are clearly significant, I would suggest that there is an even more fundamental divergence between Eastern icons and Western sacred art, which can be captured when we consider the function of light and space in sacred imagery.

Figures 102a and b. The deep-seated difference between Eastern and Western sacred art is well illustrated by two renowned Madonna portrayals, the Mother God of Vladimir (12th c., Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) and Raphael’s Aldobrandini Madonna (1509-10, National Gallery, London)

184 Book 10, Chapters 33-34.
We have seen earlier that the Eastern church assigned unique importance to divine, “uncreated” light, and it is important to note that the Medieval West was also enthralled by luminosity. Eco describes that the love of light was reflected everywhere, from Medieval literature to Gothic cathedrals. However, the Western light was earthly light that typically filled earthly space, which in turn was described in increasing precision of perspective in the Renaissance. In a paper contrasting the uncreated and created lights of the East and West in Transfiguration imagery, Rosemary Muir Wright highlights a real challenge that Western painters faced in this respect: “How were artists to represent the miraculous apparition of the glory of the Transfiguration in a context of space and real light?” The pictorial developments of the three-dimensional space that needed to be filled with a convincing illusion of light and atmosphere prevented the artists from distinguishing between light as natural radiance and light as glory.

The challenge to represent two sorts of light – divine and earthly – can be illustrated by the specific task of depicting the “halo” in sacred pictures: The uncreated light of glory shining in Jesus’ (or a saint’s) face was initially denoted in Medieval art (both Eastern and Western) with a halo of a spherical shape encasing the head. However, with the advance of increasing realism in painting in the Renaissance period the round halo surrounding the face often became a flat golden disk or ring that appeared in perspective, floating above the head (e.g. Figures 104a and 104b).

186 Eco, Art and Beauty, 46.
104a, b and 105); as such, the halo became a crown-like marker of sainthood rather than an expression of uncreated light and a symbol of transcendental beauty, and in later periods it often disappeared altogether from images of biblical themes. This evolution is a good illustration of a transformation process in Western art that started around the 14th century and which most art historians would commend for its growing sophistication and naturalistic refinement (e.g. added optical illusions, intricate three-dimensional perspective and depth). Yet, as the halo example shows, the same process can also be seen as a decline and an impoverishment: what sacred art gained in the Quattrocento in terms of naturalistic expressiveness, it lost in terms of spirituality. As Evdokimov concludes (admittedly from an Orthodox perspective), Renaissance art, “though more refined and more reflective of the natural world, lost the ability to directly grasp and portray the transcendent.”

Indeed, following the artistic developments of the Renaissance, even angels became flesh-and-blood beauties in Western paintings, and the plump winged pink babies (i.e. the “putti”) accompanying angels in the Baroque skies (e.g. Figure 107) must surely be seen as a spiritual low point in “sacred” Western art! In terms of content, this transformation process inevitably led, in the opinions of some, to paintings of Christian themes completely losing their sacred nature and becoming “nothing more than an occasion for the artist to exercise his talents on a portrait,

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188 Evdokimov, Icon, 73.
anatomy, or landscape.” As Evdokimov concludes, “The so-called religious art that we find in churches today is completely bereft of the sacred.” While this statement might need to be qualified because we do find some examples of artistic effort to express spiritual depth in Western contemporary art (e.g. Figures 2, 6, 186 and 188), Evdokimov’s characterisation of a general trend seems to be correct.

In what way were Eastern icons different from the emerging Western characteristics described above? The essential difference lies in the fact that an icon in the Eastern church is not regarded as a work of “art;” it is neither decoration, nor illustration but rather a focal channel of worship and an integral part of the liturgy. In fact, an excess of aesthetic beauty in icons could even be considered detrimental because “such beauty could detract the person’s interior look from the revelation of the Mystery.” Accordingly, Byzantine iconography is an extremely stylised form of imagery, whose main purpose is to open a window “on the eternal, presentations of the heavenly world into which the viewer – that is, the worshipper – is drawn.” Fortounatto and Cunningham emphasise that it is this capacity of icons to offer a window into eternal meaning that makes them worthy of honour and devotion – an honour that is “not offered to the icon itself,

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189 Ibid., 74.
190 Ibid., 74-75.
191 Ouspensky, Icon 1, 8.
192 Evdokimov, Icon, 90.
193 Lee, Transfiguration, 135.
but to what it represents.” The subjects of the icons – that is, the scenes and people depicted – are not intended to be seen in a natural light or perspective because they represent the transfigured Kingdom that is to come. Everything is bathed in uncreated light – symbolised by the golden background of the picture – and therefore there are no shadows or natural sources of light. The scenery is often intentionally topsy-turvy to emphasise its detachment from the material world, so much so that the perspective is usually reversed so that the point of perspective is not behind the panel but in front of it, as if it originated in the person who is looking at the icon.

In accordance with the above, the people in the icons are not intended to resemble real flesh-and-blood figures because they portray transfigured, “deified prototypes,” following the model of the transfigured, or deified, state of Christ’s humanity on the Mount of Transfiguration. This is why Hart states that “every iconographer is always engaged, in some sense, in depicting the Transfiguration, no matter which image he or she is ‘writing’.” These prototypes were originally captured on the basis of some revealed feature of the portrayed saint, and once the prototype was established, no subsequent artistic imagination or creativity was allowed into the depiction, because this would have constituted a break from the prototype – thus, keeping the traditional form of the icon was considered as important as keeping the traditional wording of Scripture. The transcendental dimension is also reflected by the fact that there is complete peace in the icons, with no human emotions depicted: earthly passion is dissolved in the stillness of the transcendental realm. Also, in line with the desire to represent transfigured reality, bodies do not have proper three-dimensional volumes and groups of people

195 Ouspensky, Icon 1, 192.
196 Evdokimov, Icon, 225.
197 Fortounatto and Cunningham, “Icon,” 141.
199 Fortounatto and Cunningham explain that even in the case of the icons portraying Christ it is likely that the iconography that was followed was originally based on an existing image, the mandylion, a cloth on which – it was believed – Christ had miraculously imprinted his features and was therefore treasured as an icon “made without hands.” Fortounatto and Cunningham, “Icon,” 141.
are composed of heads having the same size but with several rows superimposed one on top of the other.

I could go on describing the unique iconography of Eastern imagery for several pages because this is an intricate system that follows a well-articulated theology\(^\text{200}\) – it is for this reason that the icon has sometimes been called “theology in images.”\(^\text{201}\) However, the features mentioned above should be sufficient to illustrate that Eastern and Western sacred imagery took very different paths: Eastern icons are illuminated by (a representation of) uncreated light and strive to portray the transfigured body, while the source of the light in Western sacred art is the sun or some other provider of created light (such as a lamp or a fire), and the figures are portrayed in a naturalistic manner, often dressed in clothes typical of the artist’s day. As such, the two types of imagery have very different functions: Western sacred art is aimed to be pleasing to the eye and is, at most, expressing religious sentiments, while the Eastern icon is intended to be a visual parallel of Scripture and is therefore to be contemplated prayerfully. Indeed, John McGuckin emphasises that the enigmatic Orthodox icons do not give their full range of meaning immediately but require long hours of prayer and familiarity: “They are not an art form for those who want instant answers and solutions.”\(^\text{202}\)

The parallel between icons and Scripture was famously summed up by Theodore the Studite when he made a comparison between Gospels “written in ink” and icons “written in gold,”\(^\text{203}\) and Basil the Great concluded in a similar vein, “That which the word communicates by sound, the painting shows silently by representation.”\(^\text{204}\) What is emphasised here is that icons and Scripture are media leading to the same sacred realities: “Like the written word, an icon expresses divine truth in a manner that humans can perceive and understand.”\(^\text{205}\) For this reason, as Fortounatto and Cunningham explain, icon painters, ideally, do not paint in their own names but on behalf of the church, being aware that their work is holy.

\(^{200}\) For an overview, see Fortounatto and Cunningham, “Icon.”

\(^{201}\) Ouspensky, \textit{Icon} 1, 8.


\(^{203}\) Andrew Louth, “Foreword” in \textit{Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography} (by Andreas Andreopoulos; New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005), 11.

\(^{204}\) Ouspensky, \textit{Icon} 1, 8.

\(^{205}\) Fortounatto and Cunningham, “Icon,” 136.
and has the sole purpose of sanctifying the viewer. Thus, while Scripture is to sanctify the soul through hearing, icons do so by means of seeing. This is why the Seventh Ecumenical Council (Nicaea, 787 AD) decreed, “We define that the holy icons, whether in colour, mosaic or some other material, should be exhibited in the holy churches of God, on the sacred vessels and liturgical vestments, on the walls, furnishings, and in houses and along the roads...”

Figure 113. Vladimir deesis by Andrej Rublev (reconstructed iconostas); 1408, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

**BEAUTY AND COMPOSITION**

In order to be able to talk about the manifestation of beauty in the world, we need to relate beauty to some form it takes. The principal theologian of beauty of the twentieth century, Hans Urs von Balthasar, was fully aware of this need and devoted a great deal of space in his seminal work to discussing the nature of this “form”, which in the German original was, of course, “Gestalt”. The concept is well known from Gestalt psychology, where it is used to refer to the shape of an entity that is perceived as coherent or complete, and Rainer Fischer explains that the Gestalt can also be applied to linguistic form in a story with a coherent plot and scope. However, when Balthasar applies Gestalt to Scripture, he refers to more than a coherent composition; for him the concept signifies the form that beauty takes in order to become visible, with the crucified Christ representing uttermost beauty. Using terminology introduced by Mediaeval scholasticism and especially by Thomas Aquinas, we can paraphrase Balthasar’s conception by saying that

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206 Ibid., 147.
208 Rainer Fischer, “Revelation as Gestalt” in Revelation and Story: Narrative Theology and the Centrality of Story (eds. Gerhard Sauter and John Barton; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 80.
beauty is at the intersection of form (species) and splendour (lumen).\textsuperscript{209} Balthasar’s Scripture-Gestalt has a powerful revelational quality because if it is perceived through faith, it allows the divine transcendental to become visible; as he states, “for eyes that have been illumined by faith, the image in its totality is simple and visible at a glance,”\textsuperscript{210} and he continues, “the canonical image of Scripture sheds its light inerrantly over the whole Church, the believing people and the magisterium, and this image of Scripture at all times allows us to test later developments and conclusions against its original form.”\textsuperscript{211} This perception of the Scripture-Gestalt having the capacity to sustain the church is strongly reminiscent of the Apostle Peter’s argument – discussed earlier – that Scripture is a “lamp shining in a dark place” (2 Pet 1:19), that is, that Scripture is a vehicle for the divine light that can sustain us throughout the dark times of waiting for the Parousia. We will come back to this question in the next chapter when we specifically consider biblical interpretation.

The form that can convey divine beauty is inevitably complex; although the essence of the manifestation of God’s glorious beauty on the Mount of Transfiguration has been seen by many as the uncreated light shining from Jesus face, the summary presented at the beginning of Chapter 1 demonstrates that the complete scene includes a number of other crucial components such as the appearance of the two OT prophets and the divine cloud. Indeed, it can be argued that even the disciples’ previous cognitive recognition that Jesus was indeed the Christ and the Son of God was a prerequisite to – and therefore a part of – their overall experience. It was the cumulative outcome of a number of compositional parts that impacted Peter, John and James, and it therefore follows that the beautiful Gestalt nature of Scripture can be perceived by considering the various parts of the biblical canon as components of a divinely inspired composition.

\textsuperscript{209} Balthasar, \textit{Glory}, 10.
\textsuperscript{210} Ibid., 552.
\textsuperscript{211} Ibid., 553.
The term “composition” is most commonly used in arts, where it refers to the combination of the different parts of a work of art to produce a harmonious whole. The use of this analogy for biblical composition is helpful in understanding how seemingly dissimilar components can work together in an integral manner, and a famous example of this in theology was offered by Irenaeus of Lyons when he talked about how Gnostic heresy falsified biblical truth.\textsuperscript{212} He compared the Bible to a beautiful mosaic image of a king, constructed by a skilful artist out of precious stones, and likened the Gnostic practice of picking and choosing biblical passages and putting them together in a way that they seemingly support their nonbiblical scheme to the act of rearranging the gems and making them “into the form of a dog or of a fox, and even that but poorly executed.” As Irenaeus continued, “In like manner do these persons patch together old wives’ fables, and then endeavour, by violently drawing away from their proper connection, words, expressions, and parables whenever found, to adapt the oracles of God to their baseless fictions.”

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{solovetskiy_iconostasis.jpg}
\caption{Part of the Solovetskiy iconostasis; 15th c., Tamoikins Family Museum, Russia}
\end{figure}

One remarkable aspect of Irenaeus’s comparison is that both the true and the false images shared the same components and it was only the order of the components that was falsified. This is a genuine compositional approach: the

\textsuperscript{212} Irenaeus of Lyons, \textit{Against Heresies}, 1:8:1.
problem does not lie in the nature of the individual components but rather in the inappropriate ordering of the components in relation to the whole; furthermore, the analogy also highlights the fact that an image that is true has a well-defined compositional structure, which was, in this case, violated by the Gnostic slant. According to Irenaeus, the main organising principle that keeps the elements in their rightful place and fits them to the body of truth is what he refers to as the “Rule of faith”. O’Keefe and Reno explain that Irenaeus never gave a definitive statement of the rule but used differing formulations, which suggests that his notion is less of a tightly definable doctrine than a broader conception or dimension of truth. I will suggest in the next chapter that one way of encompassing this dimension of truth is to focus on the “beauty” aspect of this higher-order transcendental beauty-truth-goodness entity.

Figure 119. Iconostasis detail: deesis; 16th c., Archangel’s Cathedral, Moscow

Before looking at the characteristics of Scripture as a divine composition in more detail, let us address a pertinent preliminary question: is it legitimate to see the Bible as a divine composition in view of the often rather untidy redaction history of the texts and the less-than-straightforward and sometimes seemingly ad hoc temporal history of how certain texts reached canonical status?

Human agency and divine composition

Can a coherent and beautiful composition of divine nature emerge from the “messy” contribution of human agents regardless of how inspired they are? Leaving aside temporarily the otherwise true response that with God everything is possible, one analogy that might be relevant here is the birth of a beautiful artistic

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product. Contrary to what many people might think, artistic products are typically not created in a waft of artistic inspiration but are usually the outcome of a long, complicated and often painful process. This is true of every kind of work of art, from poems and novels to pictures, musical compositions and architectural designs for cathedrals. During the process of genesis, the product typically undergoes a great deal of change and revision, often initiated by people other than the primary creative artist, such as patrons, team members, co-authors, editors, health and safety officers and artistic/literary critics. However, in spite of all the “human” disorder and (sometimes) emotional, financial and relational turmoil surrounding the creative process, one day the artist will feel that the work of art is finished: the painting is varnished and signed, the poem or novel published, the symphony performed and the building officially opened. In some cases this final product turns out to be of questionable quality, but sometimes a beautiful work is born which then acquires canonical status by critics and the public alike. A play by Shakespeare, a majestic Gothic cathedral or a picture by Van Gogh is often regarded as more than merely a cleverly crafted artistic product: somewhere during the often turbulent process of genesis a harmonious composition, a Gestalt of real beauty, has emerged. Indeed, with the exception of a handful of outstanding examples, virtually all the works of art included in the various artistic or literary canons have a checked and often less-than-glamorous production history. This is simply the nature of the creative process. And yet, this process can lead to beauty and “completeness.”
It is a commonplace in biblical interpretation to point out that even if we believe that Scripture is divinely inspired it is also a fully human product in the sense that human agency was involved in generating it. The above thoughts regarding the creation of magnificent works of art suggest that the messy details of a complex production process that involves multiple imperfect human agents and agencies can still result in a real Gestalt in which the constituent components come together harmoniously; that is, the sum is greater than the parts. And if human creations can achieve this, why would we doubt that this is all the more true when God the Holy Spirit is in charge of coordinating the details of the creation history of the biblical canon?

The canon as a beautiful composition

Although we often quote specific Bible passages in isolation (―proof texting‖) – and we find that this was a practice also used by several NT authors – these passages originally occur in a biblical context that may have a profound influence on how we interpret them. The key concept in this respect is “composition” and the main question is how the biblical composition integrates the parts into a greater whole. The broadest unit in the biblical composition is the canon, and John Webster points out that by using this term we in effect make the claim “that the assembled texts constitute a whole, and that their collection is of significance for the interpretation of the constituent parts.”214 In this sense, the fact that we have a sealed canon means that the full canonical message is delivered by all the constituent books together in concert. While most Christians would probably agree with this claim, the question is whether, as Webster further argues, the individual textual elements in the canon are mutually interpretative and are to be understood in relation to the whole of which they form parts.215 In its strictest form this statement is clearly not congruent with the everyday Christian practice of reading the Bible: John’s Gospel, for example, is understood and treasured by many

215 Ibid.
contemporary Christians who may not have read the whole (or any) of the Old Testament. On the other hand, most scholars would agree that a knowledge of the Old Testament can definitely enrich the understanding of John’s Gospel; in compositional terms this would mean that viewing John’s Gospel as part of a larger composition enhances its meaning.

Without wanting to problematise the meaning of “understanding” in these polarised cases, I would suggest that from a compositional perspective a central underlying issue here is how we “absorb” or “behold” a written compositional Gestalt. The pictorial analogy may not be helpful here, because no matter how complex and multi-layered a painting is, the pictorial Gestalt can be experienced at a glance. In contrast, similar to any extended written work, the biblical text is linear and reveals its content progressively, in an incremental fashion. Readers therefore will inevitably vary in how they read the text “as a whole,” that is, in the kind of protocols they follow in sequencing, timing and remembering the text, as well as relating the various parts to each other and thus “holding it together.” On the other hand, as Wolterstorff points out, given that the books of the Bible are typically presented to us in a fixed order in a single binding, “it is virtually inevitable, for the Christian who knows the totality, that that knowledge will shape a good deal of her interpretation of the constituent books.”

Indeed, it is all but impossible not to hear echoes of other books when we read certain Scriptures, and accordingly, Wolterstorff concludes, “It is almost impossible for those who know the whole Christian Bible to not, in practice, treat it as a single work.” In other words, the biblical canon is a de facto composition. It must be added, though, that even if we accept that Wolterstorff’s point is relevant to the current historical momentum of the church, it may not apply so strongly to earlier periods when most believers did not have access to written versions of the Scriptures or when the books of the Bible did not exist in one bound volume but rather as independent scrolls. However, even in those times echoes and resonances from other parts of the canon inevitably coloured the reading of any particular biblical text; in this sense the Bible has always displayed some compositional character.

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217 Ibid.
The compositional dimension of Scripture is augmented by a network of internal ties, most notably by a narrative structure that accommodates the textual material at various levels. While a great deal of Scripture is non-narrative, the narrative portions of the Bible provide a framework within which the non-narrative elements can be understood. These narratives frames range from the main overarching metanarrative of God’s mighty acts (from Creation to New Jerusalem) to lower-level narratives, historical progressions and story lines that we find in the various biblical books; indeed, McGrath is right to conclude that the narrative “dominates Scripture.”

Thus, following in the footsteps of narrative theologians such as Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, we can view the ultimate momentum of the biblical material as a unified text coming from a narrative structure that serves as the primary organising principle in creating coherence in the patchwork of constituent genres, discourse types and voices; in Lindbeck’s words,

> What holds together the diverse materials it contains: poetic, prophetic, legal, liturgical, sapiential, mythical, legendary, and historical? These are all embraced, it would seem, in an overarching story that has the specific literary features of realistic narrative...

This internal narrative structuring of the biblical composition is also emphasised by Bauckham when he states, “While the Bible does not have the kind of unity and coherence a single human author might give a literary work, there is nevertheless a remarkable extent to which the biblical texts themselves recognize and assert, in a necessarily cumulative manner, the unity of the story they tell.”

As he points out, this sense of the unity of the biblical story is reinforced by a number of summaries of varying scope in both Testaments (e.g. Neh 9:6–37; Ps 78, 105; Acts 7:2–50, 10:36–43, 13:17-41), and Steinmetz highlights the fact that the New Testament also contains multiple “second-narrative moments,” that is, short retellings of Old Testament stories in the light of Christ (e.g. Acts 2:14–36; Heb 11). As he explains, these are intended to “to uncover the plot in a literature

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218 McGrath, Christian Theology, 128.
that seems to be insufficiently plotted. They disclose at the end the structure of the whole from the beginning.\textsuperscript{222}

The above considerations do not present a comprehensive case for the compositional perspective of the biblical canon, but they should be sufficient at this stage to illustrate the potential usefulness of thinking about the biblical canon as an intricate, multi-layered and divinely inspired composition, even if only in a qualified sense of a partial or a “de facto” composition. The next chapter will address how such an approach may benefit biblical interpretation.

![Figure 129. Daniel, Jeremiah and Isaiah; 1502, Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery, Russia](image)

**SUMMARY**

The Bible speaks richly about the beauty of God as a way of describing the manifest revelations of God’s luminous glory. This beauty is more than earthly beauty “which when seen pleases”\textsuperscript{223} – divine beauty is transcendental in nature and is inextricable from the other transcendentals of truth and goodness. When Peter saw God’s glorious light at the Transfiguration, he was overwhelmed by its beauty, as were the hesychasts of the East, who related their mystic experiences of the uncreated light to the “inerrable beauty” displayed by Jesus on the holy mountain. Thus, the Synoptic Gospels and subsequently the Eastern church viewed divine beauty as a phenomenological reality rather than a symbolic or metaphorical concept, and at the heart of Orthodox sacred art has been the desire to capture humanity in its transfigured state, illuminated by uncreated light. It is in

\textsuperscript{222} Ibid.

this sense that Ouspensky stated, “Orthodox sacred art is a visible expression of the dogma of the Transfiguration.”

In contrast to Eastern Orthodoxy, the Western church took a different path with regard to beauty. Although the significance of splendour and light were clearly recognised in the Middle Ages, without the hesychasts’ experiential tradition to validate the divine origin of these sensory phenomena, there was a growing suspicion about the corruptibility, and indeed about the corrupting potential, of beauty. Consequently, of the beauty-truth-goodness composite, priority was given to the intellectual appropriation of truth and goodness, as reflected by Western theology’s predominant concern with doctrine and ethics. As a result, particularly in the Protestant tradition, hearing the word became more important than experiencing the visual revelation of God, which was evidenced by the gradual disappearance of artistic images from churches. This trend was, of course, inseparable from the related process whereby after the Trecento, Western sacred art developed a growing sophistication of naturalistic expressiveness that, although being pleasing to the eye, gradually lost touch with the spiritual dimension of divine beauty. Therefore, even though Catholic churches were never stripped of their artistic decoration, much of the Baroque decoration associated with the Counter-Reformation was sacred only in a superficial sense.

The neglect of divine beauty in Western Christianity resulted in the blockage of a “main artery” of theology (to use Balthasar’s terminology) that affected the overall tenor of Christian thinking. Beauty, light and glory came to be regarded primarily as symbolic and the scene of the Transfiguration, where these divine revelations appeared manifest, was sidelined if not forgotten. Interestingly, while artistic beauty was to a large extent evicted from the houses of God, it became the modern secular world’s gateway to go beyond material existence. As Aidan Nichols concludes in the Preface of his book on Redeeming Beauty, “For many people in modern British society beauty is perhaps the only available way into metaphysics and religion … Beauty, whether in nature or art, provides and

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224 Ouspensky, Icon 1, 184.
226 Balthasar, Glory, 9.
intimation of the transcendental order. That is a fact, whatever difficulty philosophers may have in furnishing a satisfactory account of it."

In spite of Western Christianity’s restricted theological engagement with beauty, the actual piety of Christian believers and churches has always reflected the perception of Scripture as being beautiful; this is in line with the Apostle Peter’s teaching that as a “lamp shining in a dark place” (2 Pet 1:19), Scripture is a vehicle for the divine light that can sustain Christians throughout the dark times of waiting for the Parousia. Adopting this position, in his seminal work on theological aesthetics Balthasar proposed that Scripture makes the divine Gestalt perceptible and thus has a powerful revelational quality. One way of elucidating this Gestalt quality of the biblical canon is by viewing it as a divinely inspired, multi-layered composition. This is justifiable because, as a result of the Bible comprising a closed canon whose constituents are usually presented together in a fixed format, it is virtually impossible not to treat it as a single work whose various parts shape the interpretation of the others. That is, the biblical canon is (at least) a de facto composition – particularly for contemporary believers who have access to the written version of the Scriptures – and its compositional character is further strengthened by the narrative frameworks at various levels that provide the diverse biblical material with structure and momentum. The next chapter explores the implications of this compositional character in how we interpret the text.

Figure 133a, b, c and d. Illustration of the evolution of the Transfiguration iconography in Western art: the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration in (a) a traditional Byzantine icon, (b) by Duccio in 1319, (c) by Fra Angelico in 1450 and (d) by Bellini in 1480-5. (Theophanes the Greek, early 15th c., Tratvakov Gallery, Moscow – Figure 106; Duccio di Buoninsegna, 1319, Museo dell’Opera del Duomo, Siena; Fra Angelico, c1445-50, fresco in Cell 6 of the Convent of San Marco, Florence; Giovanni Bellini, 1480-1485, Galleria Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples.)

Nichols, Redeeming Beauty, vii.
3. Biblical interpretation

As mentioned in the Introduction, the main interest underlying my dissertation research has been the topic of biblical interpretation. How is this topic related to the Transfiguration and the concept of divine beauty discussed in the previous two chapters? One way of linking these themes is to focus on “seeing” as it complements “hearing” within the process of perceiving the divine Gestalt (i.e. the transcendental beauty-truth-goodness composite) as manifested through scriptural form. A second approach may involve considering the interpretational implications of viewing Scripture as a multi-layered composition of divine art. Finally, a third link might be related to looking at the conditions and prerequisites that are necessary for the interpreter to be able to behold the beauty of God’s glory as conveyed through Scripture. This final chapter will address each of these avenues separately, yet also forming a continuity: the first section – “seeing” Scripture – focuses on the target of biblical interpretation, while the second and third sections address the processes and conditions of opening up Scripture so that it can indeed be “seen.”

“Seeing” Scripture

Over the past five centuries, Western Christianity, and especially the Protestant tradition, has emphasised the importance of hearing rather than seeing the truth228: we have seen earlier that preaching has assumed increased importance and that the visual elements associated with church life have gradually lost their spiritual depth and liturgical significance or have been set aside completely. The main biblical foundation for attaching prominent spiritual importance to hearing is usually considered to be Paul’s famous statement in Romans 10:17 that “faith comes from

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228 The verbs “hear” and “see” are used here to refer to the generally implied sense-content combinations: “hearing” is the shorthand for hearing and processing spoken language for meaning (with regard to the phrase “hearing the word,” the verb hearing is appropriate to be used for written texts here because in the first century the default encounter with Scripture occurred through listening to a public reading). In contrast, “seeing” will be used in the sense of taking in nonverbal, visual imagery by means of sensory processing. It is possible to think of other collocations for these verbs, for example hearing music or seeing written language (i.e. reading), but in the following discussion such non-default connotations will not be implied.
what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.” Furthermore, Hebrews 11:1 also confirms that “faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (emphasis mine). If we read these verses against the background of Jesus’ repeated confirmation that neither he, nor his kingdom was of this world (e.g. John 8:21, 36), as well as against the dangers of loving the world as described in 1 John 2:15–17, where the “desire of the eyes” is highlighted as one of the main sources of worldly sin, a coherent argument emerges: the material world that is visible to the eyes is not the sphere where salvation through Jesus is to be found; therefore, perceiving eternal truth ought to be restricted to hearing. It is to a large extent this understanding that motivated the common desire in the medieval Western church to seek internal rather than external beauty and the same outlook fuelled sentiments against sacred art (as described in the previous chapter).

The superiority of hearing over seeing is, however, not as straightforward as the above argument would suggest, as attested to by the numerous salient references to “seeing” in the Bible. For example, Matthew records Jesus himself as highlighting the significance of the eyes in the Sermon on the Mount: “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness” (6:22–23). The importance attached to seeing is also implied by Job when he replies to the Lord, “My ears had heard of you / but now my eyes have seen you. / Therefore I despise myself / and repent in dust and ashes” (42:5–6). Another OT passage that is relevant in this respect is Balaam’s oracle in Numbers that he spoke when the Spirit of God had come on him:

> The oracle of Balaam son of Beor,  
> the oracle of the man whose eye is clear,  
> the oracle of one who hears the words of God,  
> who sees the vision of the Almighty,  
> who falls down, but with eyes uncovered… (24:3–5)

Seeing and hearing are also mentioned together in Isaiah’s commissioning by God, which is reiterated in Ezekiel 12:1–2 and is also cited in several NT passages (Matt 13:13–15; Luke 8:10; John 12:40; Acts 28:27):

> Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.”  
> Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and comprehend with their minds,
and turn and be healed. (Isaiah 6:9–10)

These and other similar passages highlight both hearing and seeing as important senses for perceiving truth, and indeed, in Proverbs 20:12 we read, “Ears that hear and eyes that see – the LORD has made them both.” This being the case, in what way does “seeing” differ from or complement hearing? The answer that follows from the considerations put forward in the previous two chapters is that while hearing allows us to discern from Scripture various “messages” – doctrines as well as moral and ethical guidelines – seeing involves beholding a more complete Gestalt of divine beauty. This biblical duality of perception is reminiscent of a distinction made by several pre-Reformation theologians between two forms of understanding: ”ratio” and “intellectus” (or a similar distinction made by Augustine between scientia and sapientia). According to Josef Pieper, the distinction is related to the nature and the amount of consciously exerted cognitive effort required for the operation: ratio involves human reasoning proper as conceived in the cognitive psychological sense, including logical thought, analysis, deduction and abstraction that lead to formulating definitions and drawing conclusions; in contrast, intellectus is associated with the contemplative illumination of the vision of truth or, in Pieper’s words, “that simple vision to which truth offers itself like a landscape to the eye.” As he explains, knowing was conceived both by the philosophers of Greece and the Middle Ages as the combined action of the two faculties of mind, but interestingly, it was the ratio that was considered the distinctively human element in our knowledge; the intellectus

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was regarded as “being already beyond the sphere allotted to man”\textsuperscript{233} and human beings could participate in it only by grace. Although the *intellectus* conceived in the above sense is admittedly “superhuman,”\textsuperscript{234} Pieper still regards it as an indispensable faculty of mind, because “the ‘purely human’ by itself could not satiate men’s powers of comprehension, for man, of his very nature, reaches beyond the sphere of the ‘human,’ touching on the order of pure spirits.”\textsuperscript{235} Accordingly, Pieper characterises the mode of *intellectus* as “spiritual vision” or “angelic faculty,” which is the “capacity to apprehend the spiritual in the same manner that our eye apprehends light or our ear sound;” it is “receptive vision – though it is certainly not essentially human; it is, rather, the fulfilment of the highest promise in man.”\textsuperscript{236}

The similarity between the mode of *intellectus* and the concept of “seeing” as outlined earlier is unmistakable. Of course, the ultimate Christian Gestalt is the form of the revelation of Jesus Christ – “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Heb 1:3) – and it is in this sense that Balthasar declares that Jesus is “the very apex and archetype of beauty in the world.”\textsuperscript{237} So, let us start by examining how “seeing” Jesus can be understood.

**“Seeing” Jesus**

At the beginning of Ephesians, Paul describes a deeper level of seeing than the sensory perception of visual imagery usually conveyed by the verb, namely “the enlightening of the eyes of the heart” and he relates this mode of seeing directly to receiving wisdom and revelation about Jesus:

> I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. (Eph 1:17–19)

\textsuperscript{233} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{234} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{235} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{236} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{237} Balthasar, *Glory*, 69.
Then, in the first epistle of John, seeing is again used in a meaning that
goes beyond the usual sensory perception; here it is linked to the revelation of
Jesus as the “word of life”:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what
we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our
hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have
seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the
Father and was revealed to us – we declare to you what we have seen and
heard so that you also may have fellowship with us (1 John 1:1–3)

In John’s Gospel, Jesus is recorded as talking explicitly about seeing in
this deeper spiritual sense when he states that “The one who looks at me is seeing
the one who sent me. I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who
believes in me should stay in darkness” (John 12:45). Jesus then elaborates on this
point in a conversation with Philip:

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.”
Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still
do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you
say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and
the Father is in me? (John 14:8–10)

These examples indicate that seeing in Scripture can refer to a deeper
revelatory recognition of the divine truth as it is manifested in a material form.
That is, seeing in this sense is seeing the invisible as revealed through the visible;
the only occasion recorded in the New Testament when the manifestation of the
divine reality underlying the material form was made visible to human eyes in
unmistakable clarity was the Transfiguration. At all other times people who
encountered Jesus were either completely blinded from seeing beyond the material
form or, supported by their faith and what they had been taught, they did manage
to catch glimpses of the divine person as if through a veil but were then struggling
to behold him in their everyday existence. This difficulty of “seeing” Jesus is
illustrated by Luke’s account of two disciples’ encounter with the risen Lord on
the road to Emmaus, and one particular relevance of this episode to the current
dissertation is that it also includes some important lessons about biblical
interpretation offered by Jesus himself.
On the road to Emmaus

The Emmaus Road episode (Luke 24:13–35) presents an apt illustration of the relationship between Christian believers’ insufficient knowledge and seeing. At first, the two disciples at the centre of this narrative – Cleopas and his companion – thought they “knew” and were indeed surprised that their companion, whom they had not recognised to be Jesus, did not know: “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” (Luke 24:18) However, after Jesus questioned them, they revealed their own doubts and uncertainties: they had hoped that Jesus, who was “a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people” (v. 19) was the Messiah – “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (v. 21) – but he had been executed three days earlier and that appeared to be the end of the matter. In response, Jesus told the two disciples that they had got it all wrong and offered them a solid biblical knowledge base to help them to understand that his fate had been in accordance with the Scriptures: “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (v. 27). Then, after they had responded positively and urged him “strongly” to stay with them (v. 29), Jesus broke bread with them and at that moment finally “their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (v. 31).

There are many possible lessons to learn from the Emmaus Road episode; from the perspective of this dissertation it is particularly meaningful to examine the prerequisites for the opening of the two disciples’ eyes so that they could...
finally “see” Jesus. The biblical narrative can be read as pointing out two conditions that allowed this to happen. First, Cleopas and his companion received an appropriate interpretation of the Scriptures that provided a cognitive framework for beholding the divine Gestalt. However, although – as they later admitted – their hearts were “burning” within them while Jesus was opening the Scriptures to them (v. 32), they still could not fully “see” and recognise him. The second necessary condition involved their own demonstration of a strong personal commitment to engage with the revealed truth: their “strong” invitation to Jesus to stay with them, that is, to be part of their life. Once these conditions were met, they were ready to receive the broader revelation of Jesus when he broke bread with them. It is noteworthy that obtaining cognitive understanding about Jesus – that is, “hearing” the truth – was not the culmination of the journey to spiritual enlightenment in the episode but an interim step, however important, towards a higher-level encounter with Jesus through “seeing” and recognising him. This need to go beyond intellectual understanding and to perceive through the “eyes of the heart” (Eph 1:18) is exactly what David Bentley Hart talks about as being the power of Christian thought at the beginning of his book on beauty (also cited in the Introduction):

What Christian thought offers the world is not a set of “rational” arguments that (suppressing certain of their premises) force assent from others by leaving them, like the interlocutors of Socrates, at a loss for words; rather, it stands before the world principally with the story it tells concerning God and creation, the form of Christ, the loveliness of the practice of Christian charity — and the rhetorical richness of its idiom. Making its appeal first to the eye and heart, as the only way it may “command” assent, the church cannot separate truth from rhetoric, or from beauty.238

Let us consider how these thoughts can be applied to “seeing” Scripture.

"Seeing” Scripture

Hart points out that a central characteristic of the current postmodern era is the absence of any recognised absolute metanarrative structure, resulting in a state where “all ‘truths’ are endlessly fluid.”239 From this perspective, “seeing” can be

238 Hart, Beauty, 4.
239 Eco, Art and Beauty, 7.
perceived as an attempt to tap into the transcendental beauty-truth-goodness composite in order to find a firm foundation for our understanding. Ironically, the desire to foreground beauty in response to the unstable character of intellectual rationalism in the postmodern era is motivated by reasons that are very similar but in a reversed sense to the reasons why beauty was sidelined in Western theology in the Middle Ages. As Eco summarises – and as we have also seen in the previous chapter – scholastic theory treated artistic/poetic creativity with suspicion for being inferior to pure intellectual thought; Eco for example cites Thomas Aquinas stating that “poetic matters cannot be grasped by the human reason because they are deficient in truth.”

While Aquinas is referring to ratio rather than intellectus here, he cites a general reason for the inability of poetic beauty to capture truth, namely that the “poet represents things by metaphors.” This illustrates the extent to which theological thought has changed over the centuries, since in the contemporary postmodern zeitgeist, Hart portrays metaphors as the unsteady foundation of intellectual reasoning rather than of poetic beauty: the postmodern condition “is an awareness that all metanarrative structures stand upon a shifting surface of dead and living metaphors.”

It has been demonstrated in the previous two sections that “seeing” is sometimes used in the Bible in a deeper sense than the perception of visual imagery, rather as a deeper mode of gaining awareness related to receiving wisdom and revelation about Jesus. How can this heightened perception of beauty and truth be transferred to the understanding of Scripture? Seeing Scripture in this sense would involve more than discerning “messages” by means of doctrines, teachings and various forms of ethical guidelines: as we saw in the Emmaus Road episode, while a clear intellectual understanding of Scripture was a necessary foundation for seeing the truth, beholding God’s revelation involved building on this foundation to make truth part of our lives: the disciples finally saw Jesus when they “strongly” invited him to stay with them and he broke bread with them. This biblical passage, then, portrays a partaking of Scripture that is more holistic than relying merely on intellectual means. Such a broader partaking might involve

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240 Ibid., 105.
241 Ibid.
242 Hart, Beauty, 7.
immersing ourselves in the Scriptures fully, that is, allowing ourselves to be drawn into the narrative world of the Bible and perceiving God’s deep-rooted beauty and truth conveyed with reverence by the text. Such a meditative reading of Scripture is at the heart of God’s instruction to Joshua after he assumed leadership after Moses’s death: “This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it” (Josh 1:8). And it is this deeper engagement with God’s truth through Scripture that is underscored by the initial verses of Psalm 1:

Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night. (vv.1–2)

Within the church, the meditative reading of Scripture is a long-established practice to seek communion with God through engaging in a slow, thoughtful and reflective dwelling on Scripture. Perhaps the best-known approach in this vein has been the Benedictine practice of “Lectio Divina”, which involves a quiet prayerful reading of the Bible and the ensuing pondering of its meaning. However, even a church service where several of our senses are mobilised in some way to engage with Scripture and scriptural content (e.g. where expository preaching is complimented by listening to Scripture chanted or sung, seeing Scripture “written” in gold in sacred art, smelling incense and touching liturgical objects) can be considered a more comprehensive attempt to get “inside” Scripture – and thus get closer to him who speaks through Scripture and to whom Scripture points – than merely listening to a sermon, no matter how involving and eloquent that sermon may be. Indeed, at the beginning of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul explicitly states that he was sent to proclaim the gospel “not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power” (1 Cor 1:17); then, in the subsequent discussion of the nature of earthly wisdom he states in no uncertain terms that “the world did not know God through wisdom” (v. 21) and therefore, he reiterates, he “did not come proclaiming the mystery of God ... in lofty words or wisdom” (1 Cor 2:1). This latter point is so central for Paul that he repeats it again in vv. 4–5: “My speech and my proclamation were not with
plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.”

It follows from the above that if we hear God’s message in Scripture only through processing it with our intellectual faculty without going any further and building on the intellectual foundation, there is a real danger that we may fail to perceive the full “mystery of God,” which would mean emptying Scripture of its power and thus failing to encounter God fully through it. Indeed, if the disciples on the road to Emmaus had been content with the intellectual understanding of Scripture after Jesus’ explanation and had let Jesus depart when “he walked ahead as if he were going on” (Luke 24:28), they would have missed seeing and recognising him. Jesus himself also highlighted this twofold nature of understanding when he asked the Sadducees, “Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?” (Mark 12:18–27)

“Seeing” Scripture, then, can be understood as absorbing the biblical texts in a way that attempts to achieve a fuller grasp of God’s meaning, following the invitation of Psalm 34: “O taste and see that the LORD is good” (v. 8).

**Biblical exegesis as a way of life**

A good illustration of “seeing” as involving the holistic perception of Scripture outlined above was recently offered by Morwenna Ludlow when she spoke about “biblical exegesis as a way of life.” Taking the frescos of the fifth century Neonian Baptistry in Ravenna as a starting point, Ludlow argues that the multisensory experience of a “complete wrap-around environment” such as this richly decorated baptistry can be understood as “a living interpretation of the church’s textual tradition – its Holy Writ.” This view is supported by the salient “visual-cum-textual” effect of the decoration of the baptistry: prophets are depicted with their texts (in book or scroll form) and there are also salient mosaic images of four altars with one of the four gospels displayed open on each (see Figure 152). As Ludlow explains, the representation of Scripture reflected in various integrated

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244 Ibid., 1.
sensory modes can be observed throughout the late Roman empire. Indeed, we can find combinations of Scripture and imagery in various textual forms of pictorial decoration even in the Romanesque and Gothic eras; the famous stained glass windows – the “Prophet Windows” – of five OT figures in Augsburg Cathedral from around the turn of the 12th century (the oldest surviving stained glass windows still *in situ*) are good examples of how Scripture and image formed a united entity (see Figure 153). Furthermore, the whole practice of manuscript illumination – at least in the early stages – represents an effort that was aimed at more than merely providing textual illustrations; in some beautifully presented manuscripts such as the Lindisfarne Gospels (early 8th c.; see Figures 46, 115, 142, 155, 156, 163, 170, 171 and 184) or the Book of Kells (late 8th c. – early 9th c.; see Figures 34, 87, 88 and 91) one has the distinct feeling that the illumination was motivated by the desire to do the content full justice by also representing the beauty element of the beauty-truth-goodness composite.

Thus, Ludlow’s main thesis is that the “wrap-around” experience of the Ravenna baptistry is not confined to the sensory experience of architectural spaces but can be extended more broadly to the early Christians’ experience of engaging with Scripture: “Scripture pervaded the lives of many early Christians in such a way that Biblical interpretation was more of an all-encompassing ‘way of life’.”245 In contrast to the contemporary Christian practice of engaging with Scripture primarily through reading it, for most early Christians the main encounter with Scripture occurred through experiencing it as it was recited, performed or sung.

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245 Ibid., 2.
resulting in a deep familiarity with the text without necessarily being literate at all. Ludlow cites evidence, for example, that even after reading a text aloud, the preacher – in her example Origen himself – constantly repeated the verses on which he was preaching both as a reminder and as a method of imprinting the words on the audience’s minds. For some parts – for example for the bride in the Song of Songs – the congregation was invited to actively participate in reciting the words. In a similar way, people were widely encouraged to cite or sing the Psalms at home to fit them into the believers’ own contexts. Ludlow cites Gregory of Nyssa explicitly stating that the melody and musical harmony of psalmody was more than a pleasant dressing; it reflected the “the concord of all creation with itself” which “is truly a hymn of the glory of the inaccessible and inexpressible God.”

The above illustrations of believers’ mimetic identification with biblical characters or voices represent one avenue for “entering into the text” and reflect a broader form of engagement with Scripture as a way of life: they represent “seeing” Scripture as a way of approaching the biblical texts with the expectation of finding structure in them for the believers’ lives in various ways, both practical and spiritual. The architectural surrounding of the Ravenna baptistry was, then, an expression of this holistic perception and expectation. As Ludlow concludes in her paper,

The varied collection of texts which came to be read as the Christian biblical canon provided for Christians a flexible but powerful structure within which to place themselves emotionally, intellectually, culturally and spiritually. In other words, Scripture itself – and the various ways in which it was interpreted – became the “wrap-around environment” with which I began. The walls of the early Christian churches of Ravenna are merely a reflection of a process which had begun much earlier as Christians received their Holy Writ and built out of it a spacious place for them to think, and worship, and live.

**INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE AS A COMPOSITION**

We saw in the previous chapter that the material form that conveys divine beauty is inevitably complex; accordingly, the various parts of the biblical canon can be

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246 Ibid., 9.
247 Ibid., 13-14.
perceived as components of a divinely inspired, complex composition. We also saw that the coherence of this composition is supported by an intricate and multi-layered narrative structure that serves both as an overarching axis and an internal network of links and ties amongst the parts of the canonical composition. Given this featured role of narratives within the compositional structure, a potentially fruitful method of interpreting Scripture is to find creative ways of shedding light on the narrative world of the Bible. However, before exploring the topic of narrative interpretation any further, let us look at the fundamental question of whether any explicit interpretation is necessary at all: if Scripture is the mediator of a revelation of the divine beauty of the Lord, is it not fair to assume that it is perceptible and thus intelligible to those with eyes to see? After all, Jesus told his disciples that, “blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear” (Matt 13:16), which appears to support Balthasar’s conviction that “for eyes that have been illumined by faith, the image in its totality is simple and visible at a glance.” Therefore, if the main target of interpretation – as argued earlier – is to allow people to “see” the divine Gestalt through Scripture, do the faithful eyes need help to see better?

The necessity of interpretation

Although it is possible to think of a number of reasons why Scripture may not need interpretation – indeed, influential evangelical voices have traditionally claimed that “the Scriptures are sufficient for the Christian and the Church as a lamp for our feet and a light for our path” and that “the Scriptures are clear, and interpret themselves from within” – the Emmaus Road episode suggests that even faithful disciples may need help to arrive at a correct interpretation of the Scriptures.248 249 250 251

248 Balthasar, Glory, 552.
250 Ibid.
251 It might be the case that the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost brought along a change in this respect; after all, John’s Gospel records Jesus as stating that “the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (John 14:26). Still, we read in 2 Peter 3:16 that Paul’s letters contain some things that are “hard to understand” and which “the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.” This suggests that the need for biblical interpretation did not disappear after Pentecost.
Moberly points out that Luke’s narrative of Jesus’ teaching on the road to Emmaus has been a locus classicus in this respect for Christians down the ages: “If the evangelist portrays the risen Christ himself expounding scripture to his disciples, it is imaginatively as weighty a story about biblical interpretation and Christ as one could hope to find.”

This observation is further underscored by the fact that soon after the Emmaus Road episode, Jesus appeared to the Eleven and their companions (Luke 24:44–49) and once again “opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (v. 45). It is remarkable that Jesus considered it necessary to expound the Scriptures even to his faithful followers who had been in his inner circle. They had been privileged to hear his teaching for some time and yet, similar to Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus, they, too, were in need of a Scripture-based cognitive framework that would support their future Christian development. This general need for help to find the truth in the Bible is famously expressed in the prayer in Psalm 119, “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law” (v.18).

Another well-known NT illustration of the necessity of support to understand Scripture can be found in Acts 8:26–39, where an Ethiopian eunuch is reading the Book of Isaiah, and the Holy Spirit leads Philip to ask him if he understood what he was reading. His answer is honest and could have been given by most readers of the Scriptures throughout the ages at least on some occasions: “How can I, unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:31). Indeed, in 2 Peter it is explicitly said of Paul’s letters that “There are some things in them hard to understand” (3:16), and similar difficulties of interpreting the Scriptures were also experienced.

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present in OT times as it is recorded in Nehemiah that after the return from Babylon to Jerusalem, Jeshua, his companions and the Levites

helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. (Neh 8:7–8)

As a result, “the people went their way … to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them” (v. 12). And quite remarkably, right after this public interpretation of Scripture, Nehemiah reports on what today would probably be called a leadership-training Bible study: “On the second day the heads of ancestral houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to the scribe Ezra in order to study the words of the law” (v. 13).

The narrative world of the biblical composition

Given that narratives are central elements of the biblical composition, the rich literature on narrative theology offers an important source to draw on in understanding the interpretational implications of a compositional perspective. The main thrust of narrative theology is fully compatible with the emphasis on seeing over hearing as presented in the previous chapters: narrative theologians – and most notably Hans Frei in his seminal book on The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative – have argued compellingly that narrative meaning is unique and cannot be distilled in doctrinal propositions or ethical principles without losing some of its essence; as Frei summarised, “It is not going too far to say that the story is the meaning or,
alternatively, that the meaning emerges from the story form, rather than being merely illustrated by it.” John Goldingay characterises the unique essence of narrative meaning expressively when he explains that narratives show things rather than tell, and in this respect they are more like films than novels.

Frei recounts that his main concern in developing his narrative approach has been to offer a postliberal alternative to the overly flexible interpretations of liberal scholars by construing meaning through the “mutual, specific determination of agents, speech, social context, and circumstances that form the indispensable narrative web.” In order to operationalise the notion of the “narrative web,” Frei and his followers draw on literary theory, which has had a long history of analysing narrative discourse in terms of a number of specific elements such as characters, settings, action, interaction, plot, time-scales, style and narrator’s perspective. Taken together, these literary devices constitute the narrative form, which organises events or states of affairs along a temporal frame, thereby linking incidents to form a plot. Such a toolkit is undoubtedly useful for understanding the compositional structure underlying biblical stories, and more generally, it helps to articulate the nature of the narrative world of Scripture.

Understanding the operation of this narrative world, in turn, can shed light on how narratives bring the biblical content to life in a uniquely powerful way, a point that Tom Wright describes expressively:

Throw a rule book at people’s head, or offer them a list of doctrines, and they can duck or avoid it, or simply disagree and go away. Tell them a story, though, and you invite them to come into a different world; you invite them to share a world-view or better still a “God-view.” That, actually, is what the parables are all about. They offer, as all genuine Christian story-telling does, a world-view which, as someone comes

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into it and finds how compelling it is, quietly shatters the world-view that they were in already. Stories determine how people see themselves and how they see the world. Stories determine how they experience God, and the world, and themselves, and others.\textsuperscript{258}

In an often-cited paper, Stephen Crites makes the claim that human experience is ultimately narrative,\textsuperscript{259} and, along with others, Green takes this point further to argue that the narrative is central to identity formation: “We typically explain our behaviours through the historical narratives by which we collaborate to create a sense of ourselves as persons and as a people.”\textsuperscript{260} Thus, the narrative is a basic human interpretive schema, and the narrative impact of the Bible is achieved because we can personally relate to the biblical stories: once we are caught up in the world that the narrative proposes, we can perceive God’s timeless beauty, truths and moral principles that would otherwise be lost on us if they were conveyed in a propositional form.\textsuperscript{261} In Barton’s words, stories communicate to us the revelation of God “by showing us who we are ourselves, by opening up to us the possibilities and the problems of being human in God’s world”\textsuperscript{262}. The ‘human experience’ approach, therefore, sees the power of narratives inherent to the phenomenological correlation between the narrative textures of life and text.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure166.png}
\caption{Transfiguration Tympanum (west facade, La Charité-sur-Loire Church); 12th c., Burgundy, France}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure165.png}
\caption{The Prophet Hosea (variation on the stained glass window in Augsburg Cathedral; Figure 153); own work, acrylic on wood}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{260} Joel B. Green, \textit{Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture} (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2007), 532.
A compositional approach to biblical interpretation

The considerations in the previous sections offer two potential starting points towards developing a proposal of what a compositional approach to biblical interpretations might involve: (a) finding alternatives to reducing the text to propositional statements of doctrines and ethical guidelines; and (b) dealing with concerns about Scripture’s historical and philological accuracy.

Towards a non-reductive approach to amplifying compositional meaning

It follows from viewing the biblical canon as a complex, divine composition that the ultimate goal of the interpretational process is not the abstraction of propositional statements that summarise the essence or the main lessons of a text in a reductive manner. Instead, the interpreter’s role is more like that of a guide to orientate readers in the compositional world of Scripture, not unlike a tourist guide whose aspiration is to help visitors to experience the full richness and beauty of a sight visited. A skilled guide would try to achieve this by offering a balanced mixture of historical and contextual details, vivid stories with personal angles and salient highlights, lessons that can be drawn in retrospect as well as pointing out intricate details, sharing intriguing “insider information” and giving the visitors advice on how to experience fully what they see. These efforts are usually considered successful if the spectators are drawn into the world of the place they are visiting to the extent that the experience leaves a lasting impression on them.

Several aspects of the “job description” of the tourist guide outlined above appear to be relevant to the biblical interpreter because the Bible lends itself to being appropriated through guided journeys of personal discovery; after all, it contains, amongst others, dramatic narratives, descriptions of mysterious lands, poetry expressing deep personal sentiments, letters written to real people and real congregations addressing pressing issues that often have a highly contemporary feel, collections of wisdom sayings and advice for all aspects of living and prayers for all occasions. In addition, Scripture also testifies about an altogether different, transcendental reality which people may be longing for but may not be able to see without help – Christian believers can often empathise with Elisha’s servant, who
was scared at the sight of a vast enemy army, and needed payer support in order to see the Lord’s superior forces such that Elisha prayed to the Lord, ‘‘O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.’’ So the LORD opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw’’ (2 Kings 6:17). Through the facilitation of a good interpreter, Scripture has the potential to bring revelation about this other reality and to give the partakers a foretaste of God’s kingdom.

**Dealing with concerns about Scripture’s historical and philological accuracy**

The second main aspect of a compositional view of Scripture concerns historical and philological accuracy. The Enlightenment introduced an empirical-rational-cognitive shift in the way people attempted to understand the world around them, and the emerging new outlook affected biblical interpretation in (at least) two important ways. First, it encouraged the plotting of the scriptural texts onto a stable background by putting them into their historical contexts. This was understandable, given that many books of the Bible look very much like history writing, emphasising the temporal flow of events with elaborate factual signposting (e.g. by offering dates or names of various contemporary kings and other authorities). However, a perhaps initially unintentional consequence of these efforts was that biblical narratives were increasingly tested against scientifically reconstructed history, and when historical analyses highlighted possible contradictions between events as they were narrated in the Bible and as they were thought to have taken place in history, the authority and truthfulness of the biblical account was questioned. As a result, in Mike Higton’s words, “The biblical narratives had been eclipsed by their factual referents.”

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264 This is well illustrated by an appraisal of contemporary Jewish historian Simon Sebag Montefiore: “To the believer, the Bible is simply the fruit of divine revelation. To the historian, this is a contradictory, unreliable, repetitive, yet invaluable resource, often the only one available to us ... There are many anachronisms – for example, the presence of Philistines and Arameans in genesis when they had not yet arrived in Canaan. Camels as beasts of burden appear too early.” Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2011), 16.

The emerging post-Enlightenment perspective did not only foreground scientifically reconstructed history as a reference point for interpretation but also encouraged the examination of the history of the biblical texts themselves by applying critical philological analysis in order to uncover the exact details of the texts’ process of genesis. This approach – usually referred to as “historical criticism” – subsumes four related strands: source criticism (identifying and dating separate sources within the text and their authors), form criticism (analysing the structural form of the text, with a particular emphasis on its genre and life-setting), tradition criticism (tracing the development of traditions in the text from the earliest stages to the final form) and redaction criticism (examining why the redactors compiled and edited the text in the way they did). Thus, historical critics have typically been interested in “genetic questions” about the biblical text and have taken it for granted that we misunderstand the text if we take it to have meaning that could not have been ascribed to by its first readers. Furthermore, because of the concern for the history and prehistory of texts, historical criticism adopted the assumption that the earlier the version of a text, the purer and more faithful its content, because a version closer to the original was thought to be less exposed to sociocultural distortion. Accordingly, one of the main exegetical tasks in the historical-critical tradition has been to “purify” the texts by identifying and then recovering the original sources of the chronological secondary material.

These hermeneutical strategies have been developed in order to improve the practice of biblical interpretation by kerbing any overexegesis or, in Balthasar’s words, any “extravagant whimsicality” of interpretation. However, from a compositional perspective, the integrity of a text and its interpretation is different from how we understand factual truth in science. The “truth” of a composition – whether artistic, musical or biblical – lies in its internal coherence and harmonious formation that contains no false tones/elements. Accordingly, as mentioned briefly in the Introduction, in an abstract painting by Kandinsky, an intricate choral piece by Tallis or a play by Shakespeare, so long as the

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267 For a highly critical overview, see Brevard S. Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture (London: SCM, 1979), 73.
268 Balthasar, Glory, 549.
composition is sufficiently robust it does not really affect the overall impact of the composition if some of the less salient details show some variation. Barr suggests that even certain “changes in the canon would probably have little or no effect in so far as they concerned the marginal books of the canon,”\(^{269}\) and as he continues, no one could reasonably suppose that the self-identity of the Roman Catholic church would be materially affected if it dropped the Book of Ecclesiasticus from its canon, or even if it dropped all the books which Protestants have traditionally counted as Apocrypha. Nor would Protestant communities be materially changed if Ecclesiasticus or Wisdom were to be read in them as Old Testament lessons. Such changes would cause a stir because they were changes and because they implied a shift in the status of holy books; but beyond this they would not affect the actual shape and identity of the church, and its faith would not be altered.\(^{270}\)

![Figure 173. Composition IX by Wassily Kandinsky; 1936, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris](image)

In the light of these considerations, many of the discrepancies and seeming inaccuracies noted by historical critics can be seen as negligible from a compositional perspective. To illustrate this, the following table presents three versions of one of Jesus’ sayings – part of his response to the Sadducees’ question about the Resurrection – with some clear differences in detail. From a philological point of view, the divergence might be seen as meaningful and therefore to be further pursued, whereas from a compositional perspective, the salient point is the characterisation of God as “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (which does not vary across the three Gospels) and the differences between the three versions are of little consequence in that they do not affect the understanding of the overall message.

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269 Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 41-42.

270 Ibid.

And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”?  And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”?  And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.

**Figure 174**  a, b, c. The Evangelists Mark, Matthew and Luke (manuscript illuminations in the Codex Theodosianus, cod. 204, fols. 10, 8, 12); c1000, St Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai

**CONDITIONS FOR BEHOLDING THE BEAUTY OF SCRIPTURE**

The previous two chapters have described a process whereby post-patristic Western Christianity has been increasingly unable to engage with the Transfiguration; this process has been linked to a parallel tendency in the Western church to neglect the significance of divine beauty and regarding any biblical references to beauty, light and glory mainly as symbolic. We also saw that some scholars – most notably Balthasar and Moltmann – have argued that this tendency formed part of the emergence of a one-sided approach in Western theology: of the beauty-truth-goodness composite, priority was given to the intellectual appropriation of truth and goodness, which was reflected by a predominant concern with doctrine and ethics. Other signs of this transformation of the tenor of Christian thinking included the shift of emphasis from the Gospels to the Pauline Epistles, the growing distrust of mysticism and an emerging “sermon culture” indicating that hearing the word came to be considered more important than experiencing God’s visual revelation.

**Figure 175**. Transfiguration (manuscript illumination in the Ethiopian Gospels; Ms. W.850, fol. 59v); first half of 16th c., Walters Art Museum, Baltimore
In view of this situation, the third possible link between biblical interpretation and the material in the previous two chapters concerns outlining the conditions and attributes that would enable the interpreter to go against the tide of “intellectualising” biblical scholarship, that is, to approach Scripture with a disposition that would allow for – rather than rule out – the Transfiguration experience. If the focus of the interpretation is to open up Scripture for people to “see” in the deeper spiritual sense outlined at the beginning of this chapter, then merely possessing a specialist intellectual toolkit may not prepare the interpreter sufficiently to receive revelation of the text’s meaning; to arrive at a suitably receptive state of mind requires a broader alignment with the material on the part of the interpreter.

The principle that the receiver needs to be in harmony with the meaning he/she receives has been expressed many times in different forms since the early church fathers; Athanasius of Alexandria, for example, summarised the requirements “for the searching of the Scriptures, and for true knowledge of them” as follows:

An honourable life is needed, and a pure soul, and that virtue which is of Christ. For the intellect must apply this to guide its path and then it shall be able to attain to what it desires, and to comprehend it, in so far as it is possible for a human nature to learn of things concerning the Word of God. But, without a pure mind and the modelling of one’s life after the saints, a person could not possibly comprehend the words of the saints. If we wanted to see the light of the sun, for example, we would certainly wipe our eyes to brighten them, and would purify ourselves in some appropriate way related to what we desire.  

In a similar vein, drawing on Basil the Great’s *Treatise on the Holy Spirit*, McGuckin explains that “the communion with the Holy Spirit who inspires the text is a fundamental precondition for the authentic ‘opening up’ of the sacred book. Without that, there may be many levels of historical and morphological comment possible on the biblical text; but no exegesis properly understood.”  

In his *Homily on the Transfiguration*, Gregory Palamas states the same principle with regard to perceiving luminous beauty: “True beauty, essentially, can be contemplated only with a purified mind. To gaze upon its luminance assumes a

272 McGuckin, *Orthodox Church*, 106.
sort of participation in it, as though some bright ray etches itself upon the face.”

Balthasar highlights the necessary harmony between beauty as the subject matter and the beauty of the manner of discussing it in theology:

the Fathers regarded beauty as a transcendental and did theology accordingly. This presupposition left a most profound imprint on the manner and content of their theologizing, since a theology of beauty may be elaborated only in a beautiful manner. The particular nature of one’s subject-matter must be reflected first of all in the particular nature of one’s method.”

Although the academic tradition in which much of contemporary theology is embedded does not on the whole emphasise the necessity of any special attributes of the biblical interpreter beyond scholarly competence, there do exist some influential voices in modern hermeneutics that accentuate the required alignment between the manner and the content of the interpretation. The relatively new hermeneutic movement “theological interpretation,” for example, makes the correspondence between the what? and the how? of interpretation a central feature of the approach; as one of its leading advocates, Kevin Vanhoozer, summarises,

Interpreting Scripture theologically involves more than employing the right methods; it is a matter of cultivating the right virtues, virtues commensurate with the status of the interpreter-servant in relation to the scriptural text. The most important virtue is humility: the willingness to assume a lower status, to serve and attend others – authors – as greater than oneself. Biblical interpretation is ultimately a spiritual affair that demands a certain “mortification” of the reader.

Thus, the emphasis in theological hermeneutics is placed on treating biblical interpretation as a deeply “spiritual affair” and therefore the success of the interpretation is closely linked with the disposition with which the interpreter approaches the text: “to serve the text is not only to witness to its good news but also to embody it.”

The significance of the interpretive stance has also been highlighted by Green when he concluded that understanding Scripture has “less to do with what tools we bring to the task, however important these may be, and

274 Balthasar, Glory, 39.
276 Ibid., 64.
more to do with the … sensibilities that guide our conversations around these texts, and the dispositions by which we are drawn to Scripture. As he further explains, for a true reading of the Bible, “no amount of linguistic training or level of expertise in historical and textual analysis can supersede the more essential ‘preparation’ entailed in such dispositions and postures as acceptance, devotion, attention, and trust.”

Figure 180. Jesus washes the disciples’ feet (detail from the Passion Window); 1150, Chartres Cathedral

What are the main spiritual and personal conditions for the interpreter to be able to “see” Scripture? Several attributes have been listed in the previous quotes, from Christian virtue and a purified mind to humility and the communion with the Holy Spirit. If we turn to the Bible for direction, we find consistent confirmation that the orientation adopted by the interpreter is of primary significance; the main aspects of this orientation can be summarised under three broad categories: purpose, faith and humility.

(a) Purpose

In a study of hermeneutical principles, Nicholas Wolterstorff has pointed out that interpretation, in the end, is always a matter of choice because every text allows for multiple meanings. Thus, he concludes, to arrive at an interpretation of a text “one needs more than careful reading of the text. One needs a purpose which the interpretation is to serve or a criterion which it is to satisfy. Different purposes and criteria lead to different interpretations of the same text.” Indeed, if one is

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277 Green, Seized by Truth, 101.
278 Ibid., 65.
looking for historical information in the Bible, one might find some but perhaps little else; if one is attentive to factual conflicts and contradictions, no doubt he/she will be satisfied but will likely miss noticing any signs of divine harmony; and if people are merely seeking confirmation for their established views in Scripture, they might find discrete parts of the text that can be drawn on for support without allowing Scripture to really speak to them. Therefore, what is the appropriate attitude and purpose in this respect? Wisdom literature, and especially the beginning of Chapter 2 of Proverbs, offers some relevant guidelines:

My child, if you accept my words
and treasure up my commandments within you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
if you indeed cry out for insight,
and raise your voice for understanding;
if you seek it like silver,
and search for it as for hidden treasures –
then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God. (Prov 2:1–5)

In this passage the starting point for the journey to acquiring true wisdom and understanding is described as having ears that are “attentive,” a heart that is “inclining to understanding,” a desire for insight that is so strong that one “cries out” and a respect for wisdom that exceeds the respect for everything else. In other words, the prerequisite for understanding is described as complete commitment to seek wisdom and to place it above everything else; only by meeting these conditions can we proceed, because – as Proverbs continues – “the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding” (v. 6). What is modelled here is the need to approach Scripture “not so much to retrieve facts or to gain information, but to be formed.”

280 We can only find knowledge of God if we approach the text with the expectation of encountering God’s message in it and an openness to receive it. The same principle has been paraphrased later in Proverbs as “I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me” (8:17).

280 Green, Seized by Truth, 173.
(b) Faith

The passage from Proverbs quoted earlier links wisdom and understanding directly with the “fear of the Lord” (Prov 2:5), and this connection is reiterated in Psalm 111: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding” (Ps 111:10). Similarly, in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul explicitly states that in order to achieve true discernment, the interpreter needs to have faith:

And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God’s Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else’s scrutiny. (1 Cor 2:13–15)

These biblical passages support Balthasar’s claim that “The purity and clarity with which the Word of God presents itself in the world is in direct proportion to the transparency and purity of the medium of faith that receives it and from which it creates its own form [Gestalt].” This principle is taken one step further by Bychkov in his conclusion that beauty is only visible in the light of faith.

Moberly points out that a key passage of the Bible to support the perception of Christian theology as “faith seeking understanding” is Jesus’ teaching reported in John 7:16-17: “My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own.” Commenting on this passage, Augustine stated, “For understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that you may understand.” This position had been the dominant view amongst Christian believers until the Enlightenment, whereas over the past two centuries a profound shift has taken place in theology in this respect: Christian faith is not only no longer seen as a necessary or even a relevant condition for understanding the meaning of Scripture, but – according to Vanhoozer – “Even scholars who identify themselves as

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281 Balthasar, Glory, 539.
283 Moberly, Bible, Theology, and Faith, 40.
Christians have to check their theological convictions at the door when they enter the academy.”

(c) Humility

We saw earlier that a key tenet of the theological hermeneutics movement is the interpreter’s humble disposition towards the text. This emphasis on humility as a prerequisite to understanding is, in fact, a recurring theme in the Bible. For example, we read in Proverbs, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but wisdom is with the humble” (Prov 11:2), and the Apostle Paul also warns us not to claim to be wiser than we are (Rom 12:16), because human wisdom is “foolishness with God” and the thoughts of the wise are “futile” (1 Cor 3:19–20). These and similar passages present a consistent message about the significance of a reverent attitude to Scripture. This message, however, rather goes against the grain of contemporary academic culture; according to Vanhoozer’s characterisation of the general practice of biblical interpretation, “What is conspicuously absent in the contemporary scene are self-effacing, humble-hearted readers, who do not consider equality with the author.”

A further aspect of humility is the readiness to accept the limitations of one’s capabilities and the subsequent willingness to accept teaching and advice from others; that is, to avoid an individualistic approach by being ready to align with other voices of old and new. Indeed, in Proverbs we are told concerning parents’ instruction of children that “this command is a lamp, this teaching is a light, and correction and instruction are the way to life” (6:23), and later we are again warned, “Stop listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge” (19:27). This question, of course, is related to the much-discussed issue of attending to church tradition (which I cannot go into here) insomuch as interpreters face the task of deciding which external voices to trust and how much weight to give to them.

286 Vanhoozer, “Imprisoned or Free,” 92.
SUMMARY

This chapter has built on the previous two chapters in exploring an approach to biblical interpretation that would allow for engaging with the Transfiguration experience and the beauty of Scripture. Three possible avenues have been considered. First, drawing on biblical models, the significance of “seeing” as the “enlightening of the eyes of the heart” was highlighted as a mode of receiving wisdom and revelation about the Christian Gestalt and its ultimate material form, the incarnate Christ. In a postmodern era, where all intellectually conceived truths are inevitably regarded as fluid, seeing might constitute a channel of perception – reminiscent of the medieval conception of the mode of intellectus – that can tap into the transcendent beauty-truth-goodness composite in order to find a firm foundation for our understanding. Thus, seeing in this sense – seeing through the “eyes of the heart” – refers to a revelatory recognition of divine truth as it is manifested in a material form; it involves seeing the invisible as revealed through the visible. When this deeper sense of seeing is applied to Scripture, it involves a partaking of Scripture that is more holistic than relying primarily on intellectual means of discerning messages and lessons. The Emmaus Road episode suggests that while there is a need for a firm knowledge of Scripture, this is but a foundation to build on: if the disciples had been content with the intellectual understanding of Scripture after Jesus’ explanation and had let Jesus depart when they reached their destination, they would have missed seeing and recognising him.

The second area of exploration focused on viewing the biblical canon as a divinely inspired, multi-layered composition. From this perspective, the ultimate goal of the interpretive process is not the abstraction of propositional statements that summarise the essence of a text in a reductive manner; instead, the interpreter’s role is more like that of a guide to orientate readers in the compositional world of Scripture. This world consists of a rich variety of times, settings and genres, with an intricate narrative network creating internal coherence and movement. The success of the interpretive effort is measured by the extent to which readers can be drawn into the world of beauty in Scripture so that they can be enraptured by the divine Gestalt of God’s message and thus be transformed by
it. The compositional path also emphasises “seeing” over hearing, because narrative meaning is unique and cannot be distilled in doctrinal propositions or ethical principles without losing some of its essence; as Goldingay expresses this, narratives show things rather than tell.\textsuperscript{287} The approach may also be helpful in dealing with concerns with the historical and philological accuracy of the biblical texts: the truth of a composition resides in its internal harmony and coherence, and variation in less salient details is of lesser importance as long as there are no false tones in the overall constellation. In light of this, many of the discrepancies and seeming inaccuracies noted by historical critics in the canonical texts can be seen as negligible from a compositional perspective.

The third avenue for opening up the Transfiguration experience in Scripture is to explore what conditions and attributes would enable the interpreter to counter the post-Enlightenment tide of “intellectualising” biblical scholarship. It was argued that to arrive at a suitably receptive state of mind requires a broader alignment with the material on the part of the interpreter; that is, the receiver needs to be in harmony with the meaning he/she receives. This principle has been formulated many times in different ways since the early church fathers, with a variety of necessary spiritual and personal conditions listed, from Christian virtue and a purified mind to humility and the communion with the Holy Spirit. We also find explicit advice on this matter in the Bible that indicates that the prerequisite for acquiring true wisdom and understanding is a humble and faithful disposition accompanied by full commitment and trust that through Scripture we can receive God’s life-changing message.

Ultimately, if Moltmann is right that “The beautiful in God is what makes us rejoice in him,”\textsuperscript{288} then the most an interpreter can achieve is to help others “see” this beauty in Scripture. In this sense, a litmus test of biblical interpretation is whether it can meaningfully engage with the events that took place on the Mount of Transfiguration and open the readers’ eyes to the luminous beauty shining from the face of Jesus; that is, whether it can help Christian believers to go beyond hearing the word and “taste and see that the LORD is good” (Ps 34:8).

\textsuperscript{287} Goldingay, “Biblical Narrative,” 126.
\textsuperscript{288} Moltmann, \textit{Theology of Play}, 43.
Conclusion: Stained glass windows, Scripture and biblical interpretation

This concluding chapter is centred around an extended analogy between stained glass windows and Scripture to compare the complex operation of biblical texts to how stained glass windows produce their pervasive effect in a church environment. Such a comparison was already drawn in medieval times; the eleventh century theologian Hugh of Saint Victor for example stated, “Stained-glass windows are the Holy Scriptures because they shut out wind and rain; and since their brilliance lets the splendour of the True Light pass into the church, they enlighten those inside.”

This would have been a common perception, because a century later the Bishop of Mende, Guillaume Durand, reiterated,

The glass windows of the church are the divine Scriptures that repel the rain, that is, they prevent harmful things from entering; and when they transmit the brightness of the true sun (that is, God) into the church (that is, the hearts of the faithful), they illuminate those dwelling there. These windows are larger on the inside of the church because the mystical sense is broader and surpasses the literal sense.

After exploring the similarities between the compositional aspects of stained-glass-lit interiors and the biblical canon, the second part of the chapter will revisit an issue that has been touched upon more than once in the previous three chapters: the Western church’s difficulty to engage with the Transfiguration and how this difficulty is related to biblical interpretation in the light of stained glass windows.

Stained glass windows and Scripture

Let us imagine a church building with commanding, richly coloured stained glass windows. The windows appear like illuminated artistic ornaments or translucent tapestries on the walls, with the design of the window panes made up of varied

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289 Hugh of Saint Victor, Speculum de mysteriis ecclesiae, Sermon 2; accessed at www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,839252,00.html on 8/7/2012.

components: pictures of biblical characters, saints and honoured members of the church, usually organised in thematic clusters; artistic representations of scriptural scenes that often tell a story; symbolic images related to various aspects of the Christian faith and liturgy; as well as inscriptions, geometric forms, animal motifs and decorative borders (e.g. foliage designs) of all shapes and colours. Similar to how Scripture subsumes multiple texts that vary across genre, setting, content and time, the manifold visual components of stained glass designs are embedded in often highly complex pictorial ensembles that fill the whole surface of the window panes. Besides the thematic harmony of the content, various structural elements – strips of lead around the pieces of glass, ironwork (“ferramenta”), decorative patterns of stone bars (“traceries”), vertical stone shafts (“mullions”) and horizontal metal saddle bars – provide an elaborate framework for holding the composition together, not unlike the complex of narrative frameworks that help to create coherence in Scripture.

![Figure 194. Upper level windows in the chancel of Regensburg Cathedral; 14th c., Germany](image)

Like the books of the Bible, each stained glass window can be considered an independent unit, and yet – similar to the biblical books – there are ties of varying strengths connecting the windows within a church building, based on their location, shape, content, style or other attributes. These ties help to integrate the individual windows into the broader compositional design; however, the stained glass composition of a whole church interior has an even more powerful source of cohesion: the coloured beams of light passing through the multiple windows generate an overarching composite that can be termed the “light space” of the
interior of the building and which involves the combination of the intensity, tone and texture of the light inside the church. This light space is in a dynamic relationship with the onlooker’s perception of the individual windows: the apparent brightness of any window opening correlates inversely with the overall light level inside the building – that is, the darker the space, the more brilliant the appearance of the light shining through the stained glass, and the lighter the space, the more muted that light source appears. For example, within the inherently darker interiors of Romanesque churches, the outside light appears particularly bright and it can therefore illuminate stained glass windows of dense, rich colours. In contrast, due to various technological developments in architecture, churches in the High and Late Gothic period reached a stage of internal luminosity where the difference between the outside and inside light level was no longer sufficient to fully illuminate deep ruby-and-blue windows and therefore artists had to develop stained glass designs of lighter colours that required less light to bring them to life.

Furthermore, and what is even more important from a compositional perspective, each of the windows within the light space of a church affects the perception of the others, and this becomes particularly palpable when something has gone wrong and a slightly incongruent window design mutes or tints the colour

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292 Ibid.
appearance of that of another window or, alternatively, the window appears too “loud” within the environment. The compositional harmony of light is of crucial importance because, due to the fact that stained glass windows are illuminated by transmitted rather than reflected light, the variation in brightness of a window pane far exceeds that of any opaque form of art work: the maximum brightness range in a glossy black-and-white photograph is around 1:50, in a strong oil painting about 1:10, whereas in a stained glass composition the range can be well over 1:100, with the brightest piece of glass potentially being as much as 250 times as bright as a well-lit white wall. As such, stained glass windows are a highly potent medium, which partly explains the great power of a stained-glass-lit interior when the composition is balanced; in Herbert Read’s words, “no other art can be so vital, so much a part of solar life; in comparison, the blind masses of sculpture and the opaque planes of painting are void and insentient.”

Figure 196. Stained glass windows in the Upper Chapel of Sainte Chapelle; 1248, Paris

Sowers, for example, explains that due to its advanced architecture, the interior of the famous Sainte Chapelle in Paris was too light for the glass of its time (the mid-13th century). Consequently, on some sunny days the light coming through the south windows is so bright that it destroys the effect of the windows on the north side of the chapel: the colours lose their fire and the light coming from the other windows highlight the dust and erosion on the inside of the glass, making the already dulled colours look greyish. In Chartres, on the other hand, a chapel was added at the beginning of the 15th century (the Vendome Chapel), and the contemporary lighter palette of the colouring clashed with the generally dark interior and the corresponding ensemble of stained glass windows of the 12th and 13th centuries. Sowers, *Stained Glass*, 23-24.


Thus, the set of stained glass windows in a church building is comparable to the components of the biblical canon in terms of their marked compositional character. This compositional character has a unique feature, and it is this feature which makes the comparison between stained glass and Scripture instructive: the light space of a stained glass-lit church interior can have a mesmeric quality which is not directly the function of the content or splendour of the design of the individual windows, nor of the vibrant colours and artistic representation of the specific scenes depicted; no matter how exquisite these details may be, the real impact of stained glass comes from the serene atmosphere of the overall illuminated interior of the church building. People usually find it difficult to give a graphic description of the sense of mystical tranquillity they experience in such an interior, nevertheless it is this sense, this atmosphere created by the fusion of coloured light that shines through the multiple windows, that captivates people.

The following personal account offers a good illustration of this impact:

I walked into the chapel ... and immediately that goose bump feeling came over me. Once the obligatory photos had been taken I stayed in the quiet empty church, letting the atmosphere created by the religious stained glass windows wash over me. It wasn’t just the quality of the light or the moving sense of community suggested by the imagery, it was the sense of calm and tentative hope emanating from the stained glass panels. It was breathtaking, and even now remembering it, the emotion of the experience is evoked.296

Figure 198. Stained glass windows in the Upper Chapel of Sainte Chapelle; 1248, Paris

Figure 197. Stained glass window created of reset fragments of medieval glass in the chancel of Southwell Minster, England. Such windows, made up of surviving fragments of old stained glass, are not uncommon in churches; besides being an attempt to preserve the past, they also bear witness to the general desire to create “light space” within the church interior even in the absence of any artistic design.

As this and many similar accounts attest to, stained glass windows demonstrate in a tangible way the existence of a beauty that cannot be pinned down to specific objects or designs but which is conveyed by the overall ensemble of a complex composition. Accordingly, no matter how many superb colourful illustrations of stained glass windows a book contains, it will inevitably fall short of representing the powerful impact of that stained glass in reality, because the ultimate source of its beauty is the light that receives its colour as it passes through the windows and creates the overall Gestalt as it fills, and interacts with, the architectural environment. It is in this sense that the intensity of the overall light space created by stained glass can be compared to the beauty of the divine Gestalt conveyed by the biblical canon as a whole. We saw in Chapter 1 that Scripture is likened to a “lamp shining in a dark place” in 2 Peter (1:19) in a passage centred around the divine light of the Transfiguration, indicating that this light can also shine through Scripture to those who are attentive throughout the dark times of waiting for the Parousia. Stained glass windows can provide a tangible analogy of how attentive eyes can “see” the glory of Jesus through Scripture.

It is also of note that the full scope of a stained glass composition is broader than the interaction of the windows and the architectural space, because the quality of the light is also shaped by a variety of other factors, both external and internal to the church. The former include, amongst other things, the weather and light conditions outside, the time of the day and the season of the year, as well as any reflections or shadows of exterior structures on the windows, while the latter may concern various design features of the internal architecture, the interference of other decorative elements (e.g. salient statues) and aural conditions (e.g. choral or organ music), artificial light sources (e.g. candles) as well as the spatial position and receptive state of the beholder, the latter being itself the outcome of several variables. It is the composite of these variables that generates the transcendental quality of stain-glass-lit environments, a quality that was described vividly by Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis in the twelfth century in his discussion of the creation of the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Denis (which is generally considered the first truly Gothic building):
Thus sometimes when, because of my delight in the beauty of the house of God, the multicolour loveliness of the gems has called me away from external cares and worthy meditation, transporting me from material to immaterial things, has persuaded me to examine the diversity of holy virtues, then I seem to see myself existing on some level, as it were, beyond our earthly one, neither completely in the slime of earth nor completely in the purity of heaven. By the gift of God I can be transported in an anagogical manner from this inferior level to that superior one.  

To reiterate, stained glass can illustrate how the beautiful Gestalt is the product of the whole composition. The factors shaping the light space offer several possible parallels with how the perception of the overall beauty of Scripture is related to, and at the same time goes beyond, the impact of its constituent parts. Of these parallels, let me highlight four that are particularly relevant to this dissertation. First, similarly to how it is ultimately the light of the sun passing through the stained glass windows rather than the windows themselves that is at the heart of the beauty of the light space, the source of beauty of the Christian Gestalt conveyed by Scripture is of course God himself. If the sun does not shine through the stained glass window (e.g. at night), it loses its radiance and power, just as Scripture loses its divine beauty and transformational power if it is treated merely as a precious man-made historical document and nothing more.

Figure 202a, b. Thomas Beckett (stained glass); 13th c., Canterbury Cathedral. The two pictures present the same window from the outside and the inside, that is, with and without any light passing through it (for the whole window, see Figure 200).

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A second, related point concerns the process of “seeing” in the deeper biblical sense, which was described in Chapter 2 as perceiving the invisible through the visible. The guiding principle of this dissertation has been the belief that Scripture is like a lamp that allows us to catch glimpses of the divine light of God’s transcendental glory, just like the two-dimensional stained glass design allows us to expand our vision beyond the window pane; in Sowers’s words,

Though stained glass is essentially a two-dimensional art form, an art of the picture plane, we always see through it to a greater or lesser degree even when we think that we are simply looking at it. We see not merely the light that comes through it but light-modulating elements as well. Often the effect of a stained-glass window is so much a product of what is in our line of vision beyond the glass that if we shift our position a mere foot this way or that the whole effect of the window will be different.298

Thirdly, the light space requires, by definition, a space to light: the church interior. If we removed a stained glass window from the church building and placed it in the open air, its impact would be dramatically reduced regardless of the amount of sunshine that passed through it. Similarly, the full impact of Scripture emerges if it is read within the “church space,” that is, within the community of believers. It is obvious but worth pointing out that one cannot behold the light space of a church building without actually entering and spending time in that church. By analogy, Scripture comes fully to light when one receives it as part of the body of Christ. This analogy can be taken even further by recognising that the impact of the light space can be augmented by certain practices within the church building (e.g. by choral singing, collective meditative prayer or an all night vigil to wait for the sunrise), while some other practices can make it more difficult to be enraptured by it (e.g. disruptive commercial activities such as guided tours or construction work in the building). In the same way – as argued in Chapter 3 – certain practices and traditions within a church community can shape the quality and intensity of beholding the beauty of Scripture both in a positive and a negative manner.

Finally, just like our understanding of Scripture varies according to the manner in which we approach it, the ability to perceive the light conveyed by stained glass windows will also vary according to the receptive state of the individual beholder. The three attributes described in Chapter 3 – purpose, faith

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298 Sowers, Stained Glass, 11.
and humility – are equally relevant to experiencing the full impact of the beauty of the light space and the beauty of Scripture. Tom Wright has captured something fundamental about the necessary condition of our internal disposition when he succinctly states, “Of course the Bible is inspired, and if you’re using it like this there won’t be any question in your mind that the Bible is inspired.”

Figure 205. “The Lord God Almighty is his name!” (Amos 4:13) – Mount Zion in Jerusalem; own work, silk painting

**Stained glass windows and biblical interpretation**

What can the study of stained glass teach us about biblical interpretation? One important lesson emerges as we read the academic literature on stained glass windows: it is remarkable how little of this literature focuses on the impact of the light space and the nature of stained-glass-lit interiors. Although Sowers explicitly states that “No discussion of stained glass would be complete without some speculation about its extraordinary power to dominate a space and determine its atmosphere,” most academic discussions steer clear of such considerations and take, instead, a technical or historical angle. The detailed entry on stained glass in Wikipedia (over 6,300 words) offers an apt illustration of the usual scope covered: the first part of the text concerns the technical aspects of manufacturing stained glass, including technological details about glass production and the

299 Wright, “How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?” 29.
300 Ibid., 31.
301 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stained_glass](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stained_glass); last accesses on 10/7/2011. The Wikipedia entry is cited here not because of any authoritative status attached to it but because it represents the current zeitgeist well – most people would find the entry on stained glass thorough and of high quality.
procedures of assembling a stained glass window; the second part offers a comprehensive historical overview of the use of stained glass, presenting an evolutionary perspective from the origins of coloured glass in ancient times to the contemporary utilisation of stained glass as a modern art form. The close parallels between this typical focus on “genetic” questions and the similar thrust of historical criticism in biblical studies (discussed in Chapter 3) are unmistakable. Even works that do mention the unique power of stained-glass-lit interiors – the Wikipedia entry does not do so in spite of its length – tend to do so in their introductions merely to whet the reader’s appetite for the subsequent academic discussion; furthermore, the inclusion of high quality photos of stained glass windows as illustrations with occasional analyses of the pictorial designs does little – as mentioned above – to capture the compositional power of the light space.

Figure 206a, b. The interior of Burges Cathedral (France) with the 13th c. ambulatory windows

Thus, it is fair to conclude that the academic literature on stained glass by and large fails to engage with the real beauty of stained-glass-lit interiors and tends to focus instead on technical and historical questions. This is in full accordance with the post-Enlightenment spirit of the scientific method, and it is instructive to note the close parallel between the outcome of this approach and Western theology’s general difficulty with engaging with the Transfiguration and divine beauty. However, with regard to stained glass, the dominant interpretational approach – and the absence of a more beauty-sensitive mode of interpretation – does nothing to hinder the beholder’s appreciation when entering a church with stained glass windows: when people come into the light space, it tends to engulf them and communicate with their senses directly with no need for any intellectual scaffolding of “seeing.” It is for this reason that stained glass windows were called
“sermons which reached the heart through the eyes instead of entering at the ears.”302 This does not mean that some competent interpretation along the lines of a “tourist guide” as described in Chapter 3 cannot augment the experience, but the medium of the light space of a church interior does not require systematic interpretation in order to exert its main impact.

Scripture differs in this respect. I cited in Chapter 1 Paul’s statement that a powerful strategy of the “god of this world” is to blind the minds of people “to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4:4). Because believers are still part of this world, they cannot completely escape this veiling influence and thus often struggle to catch a glimpse of Christ’s glory: we saw in Chapter 3 that the Bible records several instances when believers – even the Eleven – needed help in their eyes having opened by someone opening up the Scriptures for them. This underscores the significant role of intellectual scaffolding in shaping the way people perceive the Bible. The picture emerging from the previous three chapters is that over the past five hundred years Western biblical scholarship has lost the ability to engage with the Transfiguration and more generally, with divine beauty, and the prevailing biblical interpretational approach does not provide scaffolding for “seeing”. As a result, the Transfiguration, which was presented as the foundation of confidence in the future reality of the Parousia in 2 Peter and which filled John’s Gospel with light, became marginalised to the extent that even mature Christians cannot always recall what happened on the Mount of Transfiguration, let alone contemplate the uncreated light shining through Scripture.

Stephen Barton has made a point about the Transfiguration that touches upon the core of the content of this dissertation: “it is not just that we read the transfiguration, but also that, in some important sense, the transfiguration ‘reads’ us.”303 In other words, the Transfiguration interprets the interpreter. At the present time we are not doing very well in this respect – the fact that we cannot relate to arguably one of the most significant episodes in the New Testament is an

indication that we are missing something important; the way we read Scripture is veiling some fundamental dimensions of its truth. The material presented in this dissertation points to the conclusion that when beauty and glory were gradually sidelined in Western biblical scholarship after the Reformation and the general approach shifted towards a cognitive-intellectual disposition, this shift rendered Western theology vulnerable to interference from the rational-secular zeitgeist of the Enlightenment. The resulting change to a largely rational, scientific approach has left contemporary Christian thought without any robust control criteria or mechanisms – any “godly norms” or “rules of faith” – to evaluate the intellectual paradigms proposed; indeed, it is no exaggeration to suggest that almost anything goes that is expressed in a sufficiently scholarly and learned manner. Worse still, any voice that dares to cry out that something has gone altogether wrong – even that of such an eminent scholar as Brevard Childs in 1979\(^{304}\) – is regarded merely as yet another theory or viewpoint to be considered alongside the others. Without beauty we do not have a solid enough foundation to judge the truth of theological reasoning.

**Figure 208. Variation on the 6th c. Madaba Map of Jerusalem (Madaba, Jordan); own work, acrylic on golden foil**

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\(^{304}\) In the introduction to his well-known canonical approach, Childs wrote: “I began to realize that there was something fundamentally wrong with the foundations of the biblical discipline. … I am now convinced that the relation between the historical critical study of the Bible and its theological use as religious literature within a community of faith and practice needs to be completely rethought. Minor adjustments are not only inadequate, but also conceal the extent of the dry rot.” Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 13.
Bibliography


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Figure 214 Chi-Rho symbol of Christ (based on the fresco image in the Pécs Catacomb, Hungary); own work, silk painting


Figure 217. Transfiguration (manuscript illumination in the Mokvi Gospels; Q-902, 59v); 1300, National Center of Manuscripts, Tbilisi, Georgia
APPENDIX A

RECORDS OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF “BEHOLDING THE DIVINE LIGHT”

The influential desert father Arsenius the Great (5th c.):

A brother went to the cell of the abbot Arsenius in Scete, and looked through the window, and saw the old man as it were one flame. 305

Symeon the New Theologian (11th c.):

I often saw the Light; sometimes it appeared to me within me, when my soul possessed peace and silence; sometimes it only appeared afar off, and even hid itself altogether. Then I suffered an immense sorrow, thinking that I should never see it again. But when I began to weep, and witnessed to my complete detachment from everything, and to an absolute humility and obedience, the Light reappeared like the sun which chases away the thick clouds, and which gradually discloses itself, and brings joyfulness. 306

Speaking about himself in the third person, in his 22nd Catechesis Symeon the New Theologian offers one of the best-known accounts of the experience of beholding the uncreated light:

One day, as he stood and recited, “God, have mercy upon me, a sinner,” uttering it with his mind rather than his mouth, suddenly a flood of divine radiance appeared from above and filled the entire room. As this happened the young man lost all awareness [of his surroundings] and forgot that he was in a house or that he was under a roof. He saw nothing but light all around him and forgot that he was standing on the ground. He was not afraid of falling; he was not concerned with the world, nor did anything pertaining to men and corporeal beings enter into his mind. Instead, he was wholly in the presence of immaterial light and seemed to himself to have turned into light. Oblivious of the entire world he was filled with tears and with ineffable joy and gladness. His mind then ascended to heaven and beheld yet another light, which was clearer than that which was close at hand. 307

15th c. Slavic account of Euthymios of Trnovo:

After he knocked many times on the semantron and the father did not answer, he quickly appeared before the old man’s cell, thinking that this unusual silence was not a good sign. When he knocked on the door, and the hoped-for voice was as silent as before, he peered through a small little

306 Cited by Lossky, Mystical Theology, 226.
307 Cited by Andreopoulos, Metamorphosis, 187.
window and saw the spirit-bearing one glowing like fire from head to toe, standing straight—as the Scriptures describe Samuel—his blessed arms raised, motionless, his eyes turned upward like his hands.  

19th c. Russian hesychast Seraphim of Sarov, as recorded by his disciple, Nicholas Motovilov (for more details, see Appendix B):

I glanced at his face and there came over me an even greater reverent awe. Imagine in the centre of the sun, in the dazzling light of its midday rays, the face of a man talking to you. You see the movement of his lips and the changing expression of his eyes, you hear his voice, you feel someone holding your shoulders; yet you do not see his hands, you do not even see yourself or his figure, but only a blinding light spreading far around for several yards and illumining with its glaring sheen both the snow-blanket which covered the forest glade and the snow-flakes which besprinkled me and the great Elder.  

20th c. Greek hesychast, Elder Joseph, as recorded by his disciple, Ephraim:

Many times we saw him after hours of prayer of the heart with his face changed and bright. It is not at all strange that the light in which his soul continuously bathed would at times also visibly bathe his body. Besides, the halos on saints and angels we see depicted on icons are simply a reflection of the uncreated light of grace which shines within them.  

Elder Joseph’s own account:

A monk is not like someone you meet who speaks words without fruit. A true monk is a product of the Holy Spirit. When through obedience and hesychia a monk’s senses have been purified, his nous has been calmed, and his heart has been cleansed, he then receives grace and enlightenment of knowledge. He becomes all light, all nous, all lucid. He overflows with so much theology that even if three people were to start writing down what they were hearing, they could not keep up with the current of grace coming out in waves, spreading peace and utmost quiescence of passions throughout the body. The heart burns with divine love, and he cries out, “Hold back, my dear Jesus, the waves of Thy grace, for I am melting like wax.” Truly he melts, unable to bear it. His nous is caught up into theoria. A mixing occurs; he is transformed and becomes one with God to the point that he cannot recognize or distinguish himself, just like iron in a furnace becomes one with the fire.  

20th c. British marine Nigel Mumford’s account of his conversion experience:

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308 From a eulogy by Gregory Cemblak; cited by Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, 243-244.
309 Accessed at [http://orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/wonderful.aspx on 21/2/2011](http://orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/wonderful.aspx); for more details about this experience, see Appendix B.
I found myself kneeling in the front of the chapel. The boy prayed, but the only thing in my mind was “What am I doing?” Then suddenly there was silence. I bowed in prayer, half-listening to what he had been saying. I felt I had been put on the spot—trembling with fear for myself and fear of what I would say. I tried to think of something intelligent to say, but I couldn’t. Then my mind went blank and a sort of peace came over me, a wonderful feeling, almost like I was washed in peace, showered in peace. It started in my head and flowed through me. I opened my eyes quite naturally, feeling no fear at all and was shocked to see the cross above the altar bathed in light. I heard myself say, “I see the light.” At that moment, it didn’t mean much to me. But the boy leapt up with excitement and rejoicing. He ran out of the chapel and told everyone.  

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Figure 220 a, b, c, d. Jerusalem panels 1-4; own work, acrylic on wood

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Appendix B

ST. SERAPHIM’S CONVERSATION WITH NICHOLAS ALEXANDROVICH
MOTOVILOV

In the first half of the 19th century, on a gloomy Thursday morning at the foot of a hill on the banks of the River Sarovka in Russia, Father Seraphim – who later came to be recognised as one of the most renowned saints of the Orthodox church – had a conversation with a disciple called Nicholas Motovilov. In a detailed recollection of this conversation, Motovilov recorded the Elder as saying,

In the times in which we live, we have reached such a degree of lukewarmness, almost everywhere, in the holy faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, such an insensibility towards communion with God, that really one can say, we have departed almost entirely from the true Christian life. Passages of the Bible seem strange to us today. ... This failure to understand has come about because we have departed from the simplicity of the original Christian knowledge. Under the pretext of education, we have reached such a darkness of ignorance that what the ancients understood so clearly seems to us almost inconceivable.

Later in the conversation, in an attempt to explain “still more clearly what is meant by the grace of God,” Father Seraphim said:

The grace of the Holy Spirit is the light which enlightens man. The whole of Sacred Scripture speaks about this. Thus our holy Father David said: Thy word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path (Ps 118:105)... Remember the Transfiguration of the Lord on Mount Tabor. A great light encircled Him, and His raiment became shining, exceedingly white like snow (Mk. 9:3), and His disciples fell on their faces from fear.

Motovilov then recounts how he asked the Elder the fundamental question, “But how can I know that I am in the grace of the Holy Spirit?” In response, Father Seraphim took him “very firmly by the shoulders” and said, “We are both

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313 N. A. Motovilov (1809-1879) was a disciple of the 19th century Orthodox Elder, Father Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833), recording many conversations with him. Most of these records remained unpublished during Motovilov’s lifetime, and were stored in baskets in the attic of his house. In 1903, Motovilov’s widow passed the baskets with the manuscripts to the Orthodox writer Sergei Alexandrovich Nilus. Amongst the manuscripts was an exercise book that contained this conversation, first published in the “Moscow News” in 1903, the same year as when Father Seraphim was canonised. The full text of the conversation (over 10,000 words) can be found at http://orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/wonderful.aspx (last accessed on 17/7/2011).

314 The translator of the published document on the “orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/wonderful.aspx” website is anonymous; in the extracts quoted I present this translation, except for the first two sentences in the first cited extract, where I follow Lossky’s translation in Lossky, Mystical Theology, 230.
in the Spirit of God now, my son. Why don’t you look at me?” Motovilov answered, “I cannot look, Father, because your eyes are flashing like lightning. Your face has become brighter than the sun, and my eyes ache with pain.” Father Seraphim said: “Don’t be alarmed, your Godliness! Now you yourself have become as bright as I am. You are now in the fullness of the Spirit of God yourself; otherwise you would not be able to see me as I am.” Then he whispered softly in Motovilov’s ear:

Thank the Lord God for His unutterable mercy to us! You saw that I did not even cross myself; and only in my heart I prayed mentally to the Lord God and said within myself: “Lord, grant him to see clearly with his bodily eyes that descent of Thy Spirit which Thou grantest to Thy servants when Thou art pleased to appear in the light of Thy magnificent glory.”

Motovilov then records that soon afterwards Father Seraphim asked him again, “But why, my son, do you not look me in the eyes? Just look, and don’t be afraid! The Lord is with us!” This is what Motovilov saw:

After these words I glanced at his face and there came over me an even greater reverent awe. Imagine in the centre of the sun, in the dazzling light of its midday rays, the face of a man talking to you. You see the movement of his lips and the changing expression of his eyes, you hear his voice, you feel someone holding your shoulders; yet you do not see his hands, you do not even see yourself or his figure, but only a blinding light spreading far around for several yards and illumining with its glaring sheen both the snow-blanket which covered the forest glade and the snow-flakes which besprinkled me and the great Elder.

Before writing this dissertation, I would not have known what to make of Father Seraphim’s words or the miraculous, dazzling light surrounding him.

Reading Motovilov’s recollections now, Father Seraphim’s teaching is reminiscent of the passage in 2 Peter about the Transfiguration and about Scripture being “a lamp shining in a dark place” (2 Pet 1:19). And when Motovilov asked for confirmation that that he was indeed “in the grace of the Holy Spirit,” it was granted to him in a form that bore a close resemblance to what Peter, John and James experienced on the Mount of Transfiguration or what Paul experienced on the road to Damascus. Motovilov recalls that besides seeing the “blinding light,” he also felt an “extraordinary sweetness” and an “extraordinary joy in all his heart;” and he smelled a fragrance that compared to “nothing on earth.”

Towards the end of the conversation, Father Seraphim asked his disciple, “Will you remember this manifestation of God’s ineffable mercy which has visited
us?” Motovilov answered, “I don’t know, Father, whether the Lord will grant me to remember this mercy of God always as vividly and clearly as I feel it now.” To this the Elder replied,

I think that the Lord will help you to retain it in your memory forever, or His goodness would never have instantly bowed in this way to my humble prayer and so quickly anticipated the request of poor Seraphim; all the more so, because it is not given to you alone to understand it, but through you it is for the whole world, in order that you yourself may be confirmed in God’s work and may be useful to others.

These are the final words in Nicholas Motovilov’s handwritten notes of this conversation:

And during the whole of this time, from the moment when Father Seraphim’s face became radiant, this illumination continued; and all that he told me from the beginning of the narrative till now, he said while remaining in one and the same position. The ineffable glow of the light which emanated from him I myself saw with my own eyes. And I am ready to vouch for it with an oath.

Figure 223. “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you” (Num 6:24–25) – New Jerusalem; own work, silk painting
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Photos in the top margin

The series of photos in the top margin of the text have been taken by an automatic web camera (www.02ws.com/station.php?section=webCamera.jpg&lang=0) in a weather station in the Nayot district of Jerusalem (red “A” in the map) facing the north horizon, with Malcha on the left hand side, the Hebrew University in the top centre and the Old City on the right. The camera takes pictures every five minutes, alternating between a broad panorama of the city and a high resolution zoomed view of the city centre. The pictures were downloaded between February and July, 2011.

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Figure 17. Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration (detail); 12th c., Cappella Palatina di Palermo, Sicily
Figure 18. Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration (detail); 1497, Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery, Russia
Figure 19. Moses (left) Jesus and Elijah (right) on the holy mountain (detail); 1470-80, Museum of History and Architecture, Novgorod, Russia
Figure 20. Peter addressing Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (detail) by Aidan Hart (1957-)
Figure 21. Topographical icon of Mount Sinai and the holy events related to the site; 17th c., St Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai
Figure 22. The Prophet Isaiah; 8th c., Rybinsk Museum, Russia
Figure 23. Iconostasis beam with the Transfiguration (second scene from left); c1200, St Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai
Figure 24. Transfiguration by Solrunn Nes; 1989, Aylesford Friary, England
Figure 25. Variation on the floor mosaic of bread and two fish in Tabgha, Galilee (Figure 100); own work, acrylic on silver foil
Figure 26. Transfiguration; 12th c., St Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai
Figure 27. Peter, John and James at the Transfiguration (detail) by Angelos Anagnostou; 1704, Victoria and Albert Museum, London
Figure 28. Crucifixion; 13th c., Icon Gallery, Ohrid, Macedonia
Figure 29. After the Transfiguration (detail from the Passion Window – left lancet window); c1150, Chartres Cathedral
Figure 30. Jesus and the disciples descending from the Mount of Transfiguration (detail from the Transfiguration by Monk Michael of Athos); 1989, Orthodox Byzantine Icons Inc., Boscobel, Wisc.
Figure 31. Peter, John and James at the Transfiguration (detail); 15th c., Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow
Figure 32. Transfiguration; c1200, Louvre, Paris
Figure 33. Transfiguration; 12th c., St Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai
Figure 34. Paul’s vision on the road to Damascus; 14th c., Visoki Decani Monastery, Kosovo
Figure 35. Symeon the New Theologian; source details unknown
Figure 36. Transfiguration (detail from an iconostasis beam); 12th c., St Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai
Figure 37. The Apostle Peter (mosaic); 5th c., Reverenda Fabbrica di San Pietro, Vatican City State
Figure 38. The Apostle Peter; 14th c., State Russian Museum, St Petersburg
Figure 39. Pages containing 2 Peter 1:16–22 from the Papyrus Bodmer (p072; 3rd c., Bibliotheca Apostolica, Vatican), the oldest surviving source to the Second Epistle of Peter
Figure 40. Christ in Majesty; 1500, Tretyakov Gallery Moscow
Figure 41. Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration, detail from Rublev’s Transfiguration (front cover); 1405, Annunciation Cathedral, Moscow Kremlin
Figure 42. The Evangelist John (manuscript illumination in the Ethiopian Gospels; Ms. W.850, fol. 153v); 16th c., Walters Art Museum, Baltimore
Figure 43. The Apostle John (manuscript illuminations in the Codex Theodosianus cod. 204, fol. 14); c1000, St Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai
Figure 44. Transfiguration (illumination in a Georgian manuscript); 16th c., National Library of Russia, St Petersburg
Figure 45. Transfigured Christ (detail); 17th c., Museum of Art, Bucharest
Figure 46. Incipit to John’s Gospel (fol. 211) in the Lindisfarne Gospels; 8th c., British Library, London
Figure 47. Illumination in the Gelasian Sacramentary (fol. 131v); 8th c., Biblioteca Apostolica, Vatican
Figure 48. Transfigured Christ (detail from Figure 49); c1150, Chartres Cathedral
Figure 49. Transfiguration (scene from the Passion Window); c1150, Chartres Cathedral
Figure 50. Wedding at Cana (mosaic); 1315-21, Church of the Holy Saviour at Chora, Istanbul
Figure 51. Christ changes water into wine; 13th c., Chartres Cathedral
Figure 52. Wedding at Cana, 14th c., Church of St Nicholas Orphanos, Thessaloniki
Figure 54. Christ Pantocrator (mosaic); 12th c., Hagia Sophia (upper southern wall), Istanbul
Figure 55. St John the Theologian (Bulgarian variant) by Solrunn Nes, 1993
Figure 56. Transfigured Christ (detail from an iconostasis beam); c1200, St Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai
Figure 57. One of the oldest known icons of the Apostle Paul (early 4th c.), discovered in 2009 in the Roman Catacomb of St. Thecla on the Via Ostiensis, Rome
Figure 58. Paul and Ananias; 14th c., Visoki Decani Monastery, Kosovo
Figure 59. The Baptism of Paul; 12th c., Cappella Palatina di Palermo, Sicily
Figure 60. Ezekiel’s vision; 13th c., Boyana Church, Sofia
Figure 61. Ezekiel’s vision (manuscript illumination in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzen; Ms. gr. 510. f438); 867-86, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris
Figure 62. Peter and Paul; 13th c., State Russian Museum, St Petersburg
Figure 63. The Apostle Paul by Andrei Rublev; 1410, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow
Figure 64. Christ in Glory by Leonid Ouspensky; 1984, collection of J. Van Joris
Figure 65. Christ in Majesty (detail from the Tapestry of the Creation); c1100, Gerona Cathedral, Spain
Figure 66. Basilica of the Transfiguration, Mount Tabor, Galilee
Figure 67. Transfiguration (from the iconostasis beam in Figure 23); c1200, St Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai
Figure 68. Desert father Macarius of Egypt by Andrei Rublev (fresco detail); 1408, Assumption Cathedral, Vladimir, Russia
Figure 69. Gregory Palamas; 14th c., Mount Athos, Greece
Figure 70. Christ (manuscript illumination in the Codex Theodosianus, cod. 204, fol. 1); c1000, Saint Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai
Figure 71. Transfiguration; 1516, Spaso Preobrazhensky Monastery, Yaroslavl, Russia
Figure 72. The Prophet Habakkuk; 1534, Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery, Russia
Figure 73. Gregory Palamas, 16th c., Dionysiou Monastery, Mount Athos, Greece
Figure 74. Arsenius the Great; c1500, Museum of History and Architecture, Novgorod, Russia
Figure 75. Angel presents desert father Monk Pachomius the cenobitic monastic charter; c1100, Church of the Dormition in Gorodok, Zvenigorod, Russia
Figure 76. Iconostasis beam; c1200, St Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai
Figure 77. Christ in Glory by Leonid Ouspensky; 1984, collection of J. Van Joris
Figure 78. The Hand of God within rays of uncreated light (detail from the Transfiguration apse mosaic in Figure 81); 6th c., Sant’Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna, Italy
Figure 79. Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration (detail); 12th c., Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
Figure 80. The adoration of the Cross; 12th c., Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow
Figure 81. An unusual depiction of the Transfiguration is the 6th c. apse mosaic of Sant’Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna, Italy: Christ is represented by a golden cross on a starry blue background with his bust in the centre (see Figure 83); flanking the cross against a backdrop of golden sky and clouds lit by rays of uncreated light are Moses and Elijah, with the Hand of God appearing in the top (see Figure 75); Peter, James and John are represented by lambs.
Figure 82. The disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration (detail ffrom manuscript illumination from the Cologne Gospel); 1025-1050, Bamberg, Staatliche Bibliothek
Figure 83. The symbol of the Transfigured Christ (from the centre of the apse mosaic in Figure 81); 6th c., Sant’Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna, Italy
Figure 84. Transfiguration (detail from the iconostasis beam in Figure 77); c1200, St Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai
Figure 85. Iconostas row; 1794, St Nicholas Greek Catholic Church, Bodružal, Slovakia
Figure 86. The Chi-Rho page in the Book of Kells (fol. 34); c800, Trinity College Library, Dublin
Figure 87. Incipit to John’s Gospel in the Book of Kells (fol. 292); c800, Trinity College Library, Dublin
Figure 88. Decorated text (Matt 26:31b) in the book of Kells (fol. 114); c800, Trinity College Library, Dublin
Figure 89. The five lancets under the northern rose window (see Figure 3) in Chartres Cathedral: Anne (mother of the
Virgin) surrounded by Melchizedek, David, Solomon and Aaron

Figure 90. Variation on the Chi-Rho page in the Book of Kells (Figure 96); own work, acrylic on golden foil

Figure 91. Incipit to Mark’s Gospel in the Book of Kells (fol. 130); c800, Trinity College Library, Dublin

Figure 92. Transfiguration (manuscript illumination in Theological Works of John VI Kantakouzenos; Ms. gr. 1242, f92); 1370-1375, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

Figure 93. Isaiah (from the iconostasis of the Transfiguration Church); early 18th c., Kizhi Monastery, Karelia, Russia

Figure 94. Paten with the Chi-Rho symbol of Christ (from the Sion treasure); c570, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington DC

Figure 95. Augustine (mosaic in the dome of Saint Augustine baptistry); 14th c., San Marco Basilica, Venice

Figure 96. Jonah and the Whale (mosaic); 7th c., Dura Europos; 245-256, National Museum, Damascus

Figure 100. Bread and two fish (floor mosaic in the Church of the Multiplication); 6th c., Tabgha, Galilee

Figure 101. Augustine with censing angels (in the south nave clerestory rose); 1205-15, Chartres Cathedral

Figures 102a and b. The deep-seated difference between Eastern and Western sacred art is well illustrated by two renowned Madonna portrayals, the Mother God of Vladimir (12th c., Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) and Raphael’s Aldobrandini Madonna (1509-10, National Gallery, London)

Figure 103. The miracle of the Archangel Michael at Chonae; 12th c., St Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai

Figure 104a. The Tribute Money by Masaccio; 1425, Santa Maria del Carmine, Brancacci Chapel, Florence

Figure 104b. Three-dimensional Renaissance halo (part of Figure 104a)

Figure 105. Resurrection by Piero della Francesca; 1465-1465, Museo Civico, Sansepolcro, Italy

Figures 106 a and b. Another telling contrast between East and West is offered by the comparison of two famous Transfiguration representations from the same period, by Theophanes the Greek (15th c., Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) and Giovanni Bellini (1456-60, Museo Correr, Venice).

Figure 107. Angel with scrolls and putti by Tiepolo; 1744, Scuola Grande dei Carmini, Sala del Capitolare, Venice

Figure 108. Christ the Almighty; 14th c., State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Figure 109. The Annunciation, c1400, State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Figure 110. Transfiguration; 16th c., Berat Church, Albania

Figure 111. Nativity; 15th c., Rena Andreaidis Collection, Athens

Figure 112. Basil the Great; 16th c., Andrei Rublev Museum of Early Russian Art, Moscow

Figure 113. Vladimir deisis by Andrej Rublev (reconstructed iconostas); 1408, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

Figure 114. Lectionary with cruciform text (Add. Ms. 39603, fol. 196); 12th c., British Library, London

Figure 115. Incipit to Mark’s Gospel in the Lindisfarne Gospels (fol. 95); 8th c., British Library, London

Figure 116. Part of the Festive tier of the iconostasis in Archangel’s Cathedral; 1679-1681, Moscow

Figure 117. Mosaic image of a Christian king (Emperor Alexandros); 10th c., Hagia Sophia ( tympanum in the narthex); Istanbul

Figure 118. Part of the Solovetsky iconostasis; 15th c., Tamoikins Family Museum, Russia

Figure 119. Deisis (iconostasis detail); 16th c., Archangel’s Cathedral, Moscow

Figure 120. Reliquary enkolpion; 10th c., Virgina Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond

Figure 121. Interior of St. Vitus, St. Wenceslas and St. Adalbert Cathedral, Prague

Figure 122. North rose window of Notre-Dame de Paris; 1250
Figure 123. Archangel Gabriel; 14th c., Visoki Decani Monastery, Kosovo

Figure 124. The Prophet Ezekiel, 17th c., Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery, Russia

Figure 125. King David, 17th c., Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery, Russia

Figure 126. King Solomon, 17th c., Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery, Russia

Figure 127. Heavenly Jerusalem (manuscript illumination in the “Liber Augustini de Civitate Dei”); 12th c., Archives of Hradcany Castle, Prague

Figure 128. Silver plate, 610-625, Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens

Figure 129. Daniel, Jeremiah and Isaiah; 1502, Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery, Russia

Figure 130. Transfiguration by Leonid Ouspensky; 1965, collection of J. Minet

Figure 131. The Virgin and Child in Majesty surrounded by six angels by Cimabue; 1270, Louvre, Paris. Cimabue (1240-1302) - along with Giotto and Duccio - was one of the first major Italian painters who broke away from the common artistic tradition of the East and West, the “maniera bizantina”.

Figure 132. Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration (detail from Figure 33); 12th c., St Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai

Figure 133a, b, c and d. Illustration of the evolution of the Transfiguration iconography in Western art: the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration in (a) a traditional Byzantine icon, (b) by Duccio in 1319, (c) by Fra Angelico in 1450 and (d) by Bellini in 1480-5. (Theophanes the Greek, early 15th c., Tratyakov Gallery, Moscow – Figure 106; Duccio di Buoninsegna, 1319, Museo dell’Opera del Duomo, Siena; Fra Angelico, c1445-50, fresco in Cell 6 of the Convent of San Marco, Florence; Giovanni Bellini, 1480-1485, Galleria Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples.)

Figure 134. The Saviour; 15th c., Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

Figure 135. St Paul by Solrunn Nes; 1991

Figure 136. Bronze liturgical cross; 11th c., Christian and Byzantine Museum, Athens

Figure 137. Isaiah’s Prayer (manuscript illumination in the Paris Psalter; gr. 139); 10th c., Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

Figure 138. Sophia the Wisdom of God; 17th c., British Museum, London

Figure 139. Mark and Sophia the Wisdom of God (manuscript illumination in the Rossano Gospels; fol. 121); 6th c., Archivio Arciepiscopale, Rossano, Italy

Figure 140. Vision of the Lamb (manuscript illumination in Beatus of Liebana’s Commentary on the Apocalypse); c950, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York

Figure 141. John the Evangelist (mosaic on the left wall of the presbytery); 547, San Vitale Basilica, Ravenna, Italy

Figure 142. The Chi-Rho page (second opening page of Matthew’s Gospel) in the Lindisfarne Gospels; fol. 29); 8th c., British Library, London

Figure 143. Road to Emmaus; 14th c., St Peter’s Church, Chartres, France

Figure 144. Road to Emmaus (detail from the Passion Window – left lancet window; c1150, Chartres Cathedral

Figure 145. Supper at Emmaus (detail from the Passion Window – left lancet window); c1150, Chartres Cathedral

Figure 146. Thomas Aquinas (detail from Fra Angelico’s Crucifixion with Mourners and Saints Dominic and Thomas Aquinas); 1442, Convento di San Marco, Florence

Figure 147. East window; 12th c., Poitiers Cathedral, France

Figure 148. Ascension (detail from the east window, Figure 146), 12th c., Poitiers Cathedral, France

Figure 149. St Benedict by Piero della Francesca; 15th c., Pinacoteca Comunale, Sansepolcro, Italy

Figure 150. The Apostle Paul (stained glass window in the south aisle); 1325, Regensburg Cathedral, Germany

Figure 151. Neonian (Orthodox) Baptistry interior; 5th c., Ravenna, Italy

Figure 152. Altar with open Gospel of Mark (detail of dome mosaic); 451-475, Neonian Baptistery, Ravenna, Italy

Figure 153. The Prophet Windows: Hosea, Moses, Daniel, Jonah and David, each holding a scroll; c1100, Augsburg Cathedral, Germany. These are the oldest surviving stained glass windows still in situ.

Figures 154. Details of the interior mosaic inscription and decoration of the Neonian Baptistery; 451-475, Ravenna, Italy
Figure 155. Carpet page 1 in the Lindisfarne Gospels (fol. 2v); 8th c., British Library, London. This and similar decorative designs (see also Figures 156, 163, 170 and 171) demonstrate that manuscript illuminations were not seen merely as text illustrations but also as a means to create visual beauty.

Figure 156. Carpet page 2 in the Lindisfarne Gospels (fol. 26v); 8th c., British Library, London

Figure 157. Rose window in the south transept of York Minster, 15th c

Figure 158. Medallion with the Evangelist Luke (from an icon frame); c1100, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Figure 159. Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (manuscript illumination in the Menologion of Basil, fol. 107); 10th c., Bibliotheca Apostolica, Vatican

Figure 160. Medallion with the Apostle Peter (from an icon frame); c1100, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Figure 161. Medallion with the Apostle Paul (from an icon frame); c1100, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Figure 162. Dome mosaic; 451-475, Neonian Baptistry, Ravenna, Italy

Figure 163. Carpet page 3 in the Lindisfarne Gospels (fol. 94v); 8th c., British Library, London

Figure 164. King David (variation on the stained glass window in Augsburg Cathedral: Figure 153); own work, acrylic on wood

Figure 165. The Prophet Hosea (variation on the stained glass window in Augsburg Cathedral: Figure 153); own work, acrylic on wood

Figure 166. Transfiguration Tympanum (west facade, La Charité-sur-Loire Church); 12th c., Burgundy, France

Figure 167. Variation on the Chi-Rho page of the Lindisfarne Gospel (Figure 142); own work, acrylic on canvas

Figure 168. Interior of the Cathedral of the Dormition of the Virgin; icons: 14-17th c., Moscow, Kremlin

Figure 169. Interior of the Cathedral of the Annunciation; icons: 16-18th c., frescoes: 16th c., Moscow, Kremlin

Figure 170. Carpet page 4 in the Lindisfarne Gospels (fol. 138v); 8th c., British Library, London

Figure 171. Carpet page 5 in the Lindisfarne Gospels (fol. 210v); 8th c., British Library, London

Figure 172. Blue segment by Wassily Kandinsky; 1921, Guggenheim Museum, New York

Figure 173. Composition IX by Wassily Kandinsky; 1936, Musee National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

Figure 174a, b, c. The Evangelists Mark, Matthew and Luke (manuscript illuminations in the Codex Theodosianus, cod. 204, fol. 10, 8, 12); c1000, St Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai

Figure 175. Transfiguration (manuscript illumination in the Ethiopic Gospels; Ms. W.850, fol. 59v); first half of 16th c., Walters Art Museum, Baltimore

Figure 176. Athanasius; 17th c., Varna Archaeological Museum, Bulgaria

Figure 177. John Chrysostom and Basil the Great (from the “Royal Doors”), 16th c., Museum of History and Architecture, Novgorod, Russia

Figure 178. Medallion with Christ (from an icon frame); c1100, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Figure 179. Variation on fol. 10 (Matt 1:18 ff) of the Stockholm Codex Auerus (8th c.); own work, acrylic on silver foil

Figure 180. Jesus washes the disciples’ feet (detail from the Passion Window); 1150, Chartres Cathedral

Figure 181. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deut 6:4); own work, silk painting

Figure 182. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Deut 6:5); own work, silk painting

Figure 183. “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Lev 19:18); own work, silk painting

Figure 184. Incipit to Matthew’s Gospel in the Lindisfarne Gospels (fol. 27); 8th c., British Library, London

Figure 185. The Prophet Daniel (variation on the stained glass window in Augsburg Cathedral, Figure 153); own work, acrylic on wood

Figure 186. Burning bush (sculpture) by Fenwick Lawson; 2003, Lawson family collection

Figure 187. Chi-Rho symbol of Christ (based on the fresco image in the Pécs Catacomb, Hungary); own work, silk painting

Figure 188. Risen Christ (sculpture) by Fenwick Lawson; 1983, St Paul’s Monastery, Jarrow, England

Figure 189. Variation on the incipit to Matthew’s Gospel in the Mac Durnan Gospels (9th c., Lambeth House, London); own work, acrylic on golden foil
Figure 190. Variation on the first Carpet page of the Lindisfarne Gospels (Figure 155); own work, acrylic on ceramic tile

Figure 191. Variation on the incipit to Matthew’s Gospel in the Copenhagen Gospels (11th c., GKS 10 fol.18r, Royal Library, Copenhagen); own work, acrylic on golden foil

Figure 192. The upper chapel of Sainte Chapelle; 1248, Paris. The chapel contains 15 large stained glass windows (15.4 m height and 4.25 m width), composed with 1,113 pieces of glass.

Figure 193. Rose window in the Upper Chapel of Sainte Chapelle; 1248, Paris

Figure 194. Upper level windows in the chancel of Regensburg Cathedral; 14th c., Germany

Figure 195. Clerestory window on the south side in Regensburg Cathedral; 14th c., Germany

Figure 196. Stained glass windows in the Upper Chapel of Sainte Chapelle; 1248, Paris

Figure 197. Stained glass window created of reset fragments of medieval glass in the chancel of Southwell Minster, England. Such windows, made up of surviving fragments of old stained glass, are not uncommon in churches; besides being an attempt to preserve the past, they also bear witness to the general desire to create “light space” within the church interior even in the absence of any artistic design.

Figure 198. Stained glass windows in the Upper Chapel of Sainte Chapelle; 1248, Paris

Figure 199. The Apocalypse Window; 1215, Bourges Cathedral, France

Figure 200. The Good Samaritan Window; 1215, Bourges Cathedral, France

Figure 201. The whole composition of the 13th c. window in Canterbury Cathedral that contains Thomas Beckett’s picture in Figure 201

Figure 202a, b. Thomas Beckett (stained glass); 13th c., Canterbury Cathedral. The wo pictures present the same window from the outside and the inside, that is, with and without any light passing through it (for the whole window, see Figure 200).

Figure 203. The New Alliance Window; 1215, Bourges Cathedral, France

Figure 204. The Passion Window; 1215, Bourges Cathedral, France

Figure 205. “The Lord God Almighty is his name!” (Amos 4:13) – Mount Zion in Jerusalem; own work, silk painting

Figure 206a, b. The interior of Burges Cathedral (France) with the 13th c. ambulatory windows

Figure 207. The Apostle John (in the Great East Window in Gloucester Cathedral); 1350

Figure 208. Variation on the 6th c. Madaba Map of Jerusalem (Madaba, Jordan); own work, acrylic on golden foil

Figure 209. Windows of Jerusalem 1; own work, acrylic on wood

Figure 210. Windows of Jerusalem 2; own work, acrylic on wood

Figure 211. Windows of Jerusalem 3; own work, acrylic on wood

Figure 212. Windows of Jerusalem 4; own work, acrylic on wood

Figure 213. Windows of Jerusalem 5; own work, acrylic on wood

Figure 214. Chi-Rho symbol of Christ (based on the fresco image in the Pécs Catacomb, Hungary); own work, silk painting

Figure 215. Wood grain; own work, acrylic on wood

Figure 216. Chi-Rho symbol of Christ (based on the fresco image in the Pécs Catacomb, Hungary); own work, silk painting

Figure 217. Transfiguration (manuscript illumination in the Mokvi Gospels; Q-902, 59v); 1300, National Center of Manuscripts, Tbilisi, Georgia

Figure 218. Symeon the New Theologian by Nun Kypriane; 20th c., Annunciation Convent, Patmos, Greece

Figure 219. Elder Joseph the Hesychast (†1959); Mount Athos, Greece

Figure 220 a, b, c, d. Jerusalem panels 1-4; own work, acrylic on wood

Figure 221. Seraphim of Sarov († 1833); source details unknown

Figure 222. Seraphim of Sarov; modern icon in the Church of the Holy Dormition, Cumberland, Rhode Island

Figure 223. “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you” (Num 6:24–25) – New Jerusalem; own work, silk painting