

## NOTES AND STUDIES

## THE TRANSFIGURATION.

'THERE appeared unto them Moses and Elijah talking with him.'  
Matt. xvii 3.

Moses is naturally assumed to represent the law, and the phrase 'the law and the prophets' is so familiar that it is assumed almost as a necessary corollary that Elijah represents the prophets. Let us take as our starting-point the first half of this identification. Moses represents or embodies the law. Our Lord was 'born under the law', or rather by His incarnation 'came to be under the law' (Gal. iv 4), and according to the law of Moses He was circumcised the eighth day after His birth (Lk. ii 21), and on the fortieth day presented in the temple 'as it is written in the law of the Lord' (Lk. ii 23). When He had completed His twelfth year He was taken up to the temple and became, like other Jewish youths, a 'son of the law', and we shall probably be right in assuming that up till the time of His baptism He was 'as touching the righteousness that is in the law found blameless' (Phil. iii 4; cp. Lk. i 6). But after that event the whole position is changed. He has received 'the adoption' (Gal. iv 4), and is a son of God. Hence He considers that He is under no obligation to pay the half-shekel (Matt. xvii 24-27). If, as seems probable, His baptism took place just about the time of the feast of the Passover, then He did not keep that Passover in Jerusalem, for the Spirit straightway drove Him into the wilderness (Mk. i 12). Nor did He keep the Passover that followed the feeding of the 5,000, but remained in Galilee. And we read that He did not keep a certain feast of Tabernacles, but went up in the midst of it: 'I go not up to this feast' (John vii 8); that is, He did not go up as a feast-keeper, did not consider Himself under legal obligation to go up. Nor did He think Himself under obligation to keep the Sabbath, for He says, 'The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath' (Mk. ii 28); nor to observe the distinction of clean and unclean food, for St Mark's comment on His words is, 'this He said making all meats clean' (Mk. vii 19), an interpretation the scope of which is shown in St Peter's subsequent vision (Acts ix 15). In short, as is clear from the passage first quoted from St Matthew, during His ministerial life on earth our Lord presents Himself as one who constantly became as a Jew to the Jews (1 Cor. ix 20), being Himself not under the law but under grace (Rom. vi 14). And His language bears out this obvious

interpretation of His conduct. Thus He goes behind the law, much in the same way as does St Paul; Moses in the law allowed in certain cases a bill of divorcement to be given 'but from the beginning it was not so' (Matt. xix 8); and He corrects or supplements the law, 'it was said to them of old time'—'but I say unto you' (Matt. vi 21, 27). So He speaks of the law to the Jews as *your* law (John viii 17, x 34), or to others, as *their* law (John xv 25), never of *our* law (cp. John vii 51). Thus we may say that in whatever way Moses spoke to our Lord, he did not speak to Him as *His* lawgiver, as giving Him the law of His ministerial life, as presenting to Him rules of conduct. 'Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant', 'but Christ as a son over God's house' (Heb. iii 5, 6) was 'free' (John viii 35, 36), the superior and not the inferior of Moses, released by the adoption of sonship from legal obligations transmitted or imposed by the 'servant'.

But it must be remembered that in thus speaking of 'Moses' and of the 'law', we are not dealing with 'the Moses of history' as the higher critics have portrayed him, nor of the curtailed and abbreviated code of which they permit him to be the author, but of 'the Moses of tradition', the reputed author of the first five books of the Bible, which were collectively called the 'law'; that is, we are dealing with Moses the historian or chronicler, in whose books Moses the legislator is one of the most prominent figures. Now in this sense Moses, while he was no legislator to our Lord, had a real and positive function. He testified of Him (John v 39), wrote of Him (John i 47), prophesied of Him. Even within the books of the law themselves Moses is called a prophet, 'There hath not arisen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face' (Deut. xxxiv 10). So also the whole narrative of the covenant at Sinai is thoroughly prophetic in character (Ex. xxiv 1-11), and the Decalogue, whatever view we take of its origin, represents the moral standard to which the prophets of the eighth century made their appeal; while one of the prophets themselves claims Moses as a member of his own order, 'By a prophet the Lord brought Israel up out of Egypt, and by a prophet was he preserved' (Hosea xii 13); and, finally, the Jewish expectation of the advent of 'the prophet' as a person distinct from Elijah (John i 21, vii 40) was based upon the fact that Moses foretold that a *prophet* should arise *like unto himself* (Deut. xviii 15). Thus the distinction between the law and the prophets, in their application to Christ, or their speech to Him and concerning Him, breaks down; it is not their diversity but their identity of function that we need to bear in mind. And this unity is brought out in the use of the phrase itself. 'The law and the prophets', with or without the addition of 'the psalms', is constantly used as a name for the whole of the Old Testament. Thus in St Luke xxiv: 'O . . .

slow of heart to believe in all that the *prophets* have spoken! Behoved it not the Christ to *suffer these things*, and to *enter into his glory*? And *beginning from Moses and from all the prophets*, he interpreted to them in *all the scriptures* the things concerning himself . . . Was not our heart burning . . . while he opened to us *the scriptures* . . . These are my words which I spake unto you . . . how that all things must needs be fulfilled which are *written in the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms, concerning me*. Then opened he their mind that they might understand *the scriptures*; and he said unto them, thus it is written, that the Christ *should suffer*, and *rise again from the dead* the third day.' And St Paul is in entire agreement with this recognized usage when he claims that he is 'saying nothing beyond what the *prophets* did say should come *and Moses*', after which follow the heads of his speech, that the Christ should *suffer*, that He first *by the resurrection of the dead* should proclaim light both to the People and to the Gentiles (Acts xxvi 22, 23). And the language of his epistle to the Romans is similar to that used in his speech, 'a righteousness of God hath been manifested, being witnessed by the *law and the prophets*' (iii 21). And so also St Peter: 'The things which God foreshewed by the mouth of *all the prophets*, that his Christ should *suffer*, he thus fulfilled. God spake by the mouth of his *holy prophets which have been since the world began*. *Moses* indeed said . . . Yea and *all the prophets* from Samuel and them that followed after' (Acts iii 18-24). Here, then, we have the whole Old Testament called 'the law and the prophets', and foretelling just those events on which as we know the mind of our Lord was dwelling at the time, His exodus to be accomplished at Jerusalem and the glory that should follow (1 Pet. i 11). At the beginning of the prophetic series stands Moses, not that the historic Moses was the earliest of the prophets, but that the first book of Moses records the commencement of prophecy. This interpretation is shewn to be correct by the statement that prophets were from the beginning of the world (Lk. i 70, Acts iii 21). Moses the prophet begins with 'in the beginning'. But this use of 'Moses and the prophets' for the whole Old Testament and the interpretation of 'Moses and Elijah' as symbolizing 'the law and the prophets' inevitably raises the question, why Elijah? It is true that Elijah was expected before the coming of the Messiah; he was expected on account of the prophecy in the last chapter of Malachi, and we may conjecture that he was named by Malachi because the prophet that was to arise was to fulfil a similar function to Elijah in that by his ministry the Lord God might turn the hearts of the people back again (1 Kings xviii 37). But Elijah was neither the first nor the last of the prophets, nor the greatest. On the last point our Lord's words are explicit: there was none greater than John. Accordingly, if Moses represents or

embodies the law as being the greatest legislator, we should have expected the representative of the prophets to be John; if Moses stands for the beginning of the old dispensation, John should represent its close, for 'all the prophets and the law prophesied until John' (Matt. xi 13); if the Jews expected Elijah, John was the Elijah whom they looked for. This is the angel's message who foretold his birth (Lk. i 17), and this identification of John with Elijah was made by our Lord quite early in His ministry (Matt. xi 14) and maintained by Him throughout. It is true that this was not the view of the Jews. For the most part they rejected both our Lord's Messiahship and John's Elijahship, and in fact the one was involved in the other: if Jesus was the Messiah, John must be the Elijah that should go before Him; if John was the forerunner announced in the prophecy of Malachi iv 5, Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. It is this double identification that lies at the root of our Lord's question before His passion (Matt. xxi 25). If the Jewish leaders accepted John they must accept Him; if they rejected His Messiahship they must reject John's prophetic inspiration. But we are not concerned with the common Jewish opinion; the question we must ask is, who was the Elijah with whom our Lord was seen in converse, who was he to Him? And the answer is clear: John the Baptist. The three apostles did not themselves understand this at the time. They saw some one whom they recognized to be Elijah—how they recognized him we shall endeavour to indicate later—but Elijah ought, according to the view they had learnt to hold, to have come in the flesh, and he had not done so. Our Lord corrects them in reference to this very vision. Elijah had come in the spirit, and John the Baptist was he. They had accepted Him as Messiah, but their non-acceptance of John as Elijah still created a difficulty, and His explanation removes it (Matt. xvii 13). Now this collocation of Moses and John has a peculiar fitness. Moses 'in the beginning', John at the end, both prophesied of 'His exodus', from the prophecy 'It shall bruise thy head and thou shalt bruise his heel', from the sign of the slain beasts of whose skins God made coats to clothe Adam and Eve—typical of the God-given righteousness won through death,—from the prophecy of Eve, 'I have gotten a man from the Lord', and from the death of Abel, up to the foretelling of the death of Christ under the figure of the slaughtered Paschal Lamb. But more than this, both Moses and John were in themselves signs. John was not only set forth as a sign to Israel (Lk. i 80) but to our Lord Himself. And our Lord quite clearly recognized him as such. Behind Herod who put John to death were the Jewish leaders who betrayed him (Mk. i 14), as behind Pilate were the same betrayers (Acts vii 52) who thus incurred the greater sin (Matt. xxvii 2, 18; John xix 11). And John was not only a sign to our

Lord, but the last sign; his death warned Him that His own was a certainty (Matt. xvii 12), and thenceforward He kept Himself out of danger until His hour should come. Again, 'Moses, the prophet of the Law, is dramatically pictured as dying outside the Promised Land, which he cannot himself enter. John, the last prophet of the Law, greater than all the prophets, still remains to the end dramatically outside, pointing the way in' (H. S. Holland *Philosophy of Faith* p. 139). Moses hands over his followers to Joshua, John his disciples to the other Joshua, Jesus, whom the former prefigured. Moses and John alike symbolize in their own persons the preparation, in the fulfilment of which they nevertheless have no share; both look forward to and tell of Another in whom their prophecy is to be accomplished. Moses leads the children of Abraham to the Jordan; John baptizes the unique seed of the faithful Abraham in it.

But throughout it must be remembered that we are dealing with a prophetic vision (Matt. xvii 9), a vision primarily granted to our Lord Himself in which the Apostles are privileged to share so far as they had the capacity. They enter into the cloud, or the glory (2 Pet. i 17). It is the cloud into which Moses entered (Ex. xxiv 18; cp. xxxiv 29); it is the cloud of smoke of Isaiah's vision (vi 4) when he saw the glory of Christ (Jn. xii 41); it is the cloud of which Joel prophesied (ii 30, cp. Acts ii 19); it is possibly referred to by St John, 'We beheld his glory . . . John beareth witness of him . . . the law was given by Moses' (Jn. i 14, 15, 17); it signifies the spirit of prophecy, the testimony which bears witness to Jesus (Rev. xix 10). The Transfiguration was the culminating endeavour of our Lord to make the Apostles understand what was coming on Him. He had often attempted to teach them by word, in parable, or by express and detailed declaration, but He had found their hearts preoccupied with prejudices and ambitions, and their ears dull of hearing. Now a new method is to be tried by which they may enter into His mind and learn to take His point of view. They see Him engrossed with the future. One event after another portended His death and resurrection; voice after voice had proclaimed it, ending with the voice and the death of John the Baptist. We have not here to do with the corporal reality or presence of Moses and Elijah, any more than we have with the physical reality of the almond tree or the seething cauldron in the first chapter of Jeremiah, or of the great sheet in the vision of St Peter. The whole description shews us that the robe of our Lord did not come off an earthly loom, any more than its brightness from a human fuller (Mk. ix 3); it is the white robe of the redeemed (Rev. vii 14), the robe of the High Priest, washed in the blood of Himself the victim. Our Lord is real, it is into His mind that the Apostles are invited to enter; but Moses and Elijah are figures

in a parable not spoken but exhibited to prophetic sight, and their reality lies in that which they symbolize, Moses and John the Baptist, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end of the old dispensation, 'beginning from Moses' (Lk. xxiv 27), 'the law and the prophets', 'in all the scriptures', 'prophesied until John' (Matt. xi 18). But the Apostles did not wholly enter into His meaning; they were still confused. St Peter's mind had been occupied with the approaching feast of Tabernacles, and we are shown the resulting effect of these two streams of thought, the Master's and his own. 'Let us make three tabernacles' (this he said) 'not knowing what he said' (Lk. ix 33). So also he failed to follow our Lord in recognizing, in Elijah, John the Baptist. For the ordinary Jew the canon of scripture was closed. For centuries no prophet had arisen, and those who wished to put forth new writings had to veil their names under the pseudonym of some previous author. Thus it is, we are told, that the book of Daniel found an entrance into the canon; so the Book of Enoch, the Testament of Abraham and others are pseudonymous works. But to our Lord Old Testament prophecy endured to His own time, the old dispensation ended in John; in preaching repentance he was greater than Jonah, a prophet but more than a prophet; in the wisdom literature, the latest element in the canon which began with Solomon and was continued under his name, he was wiser than Solomon, greater than any man born of woman. We know that our Lord's mind was at this time full of the prophecies which spoke of His death and resurrection; He Himself tells that this is the theme of all the Scriptures; He personalizes the law over and over again under the title of Moses; He uses parable constantly in words; it is not to be imagined that while other prophets saw visions He saw none; we are told that this revelation was a vision; we know that He identified the Baptist and Elijah, He Himself tells us so; and that He regarded John as the closing figure of the pre-Messianic Age. These and other similar considerations must all be in our minds as we endeavour to estimate the significance of the Transfiguration: it was at once a manifestation of that heavenly state into which He had passed by the endowment of the Holy Spirit at His baptism by St John, an event in itself typical of death and resurrection (Lk. xii 50), and a revelation confirming to the Apostles the prophecies in word (2 Pet. i 19) which they found it so hard to realize.

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