



## The Transfiguration of Jesus and the Easter Visions

---

*Santiago Guijarro*

### Abstract

John Pilch was a forerunner in the study of extraordinary experiences in the New Testament. As a token of gratitude, this paper is devoted to him. It focuses on the Transfiguration story, and suggests that Jesus may have initiated his disciples to access alternate states of consciousness by means of visions they may have learned to re-enact. This pre-Easter practice would explain why the encounter with the Risen Lord took place primarily through visions whose basic pattern is that of the vision reported in this episode.

*Key words:* altered states of consciousness, visionary tradition, religious experience, initiation process, resurrection

His personal and professional experience made John Pilch aware that an important part of the New Testament needed a fresh approach. Such aspects as healing, visions and like “extraordinary experiences” were not considered by biblical scholars a suitable subject of research when he suggested that it would be interesting to look at them through the lens of the appropriate cultural models.

I learned a lot reading John’s studies on healing, exorcism, skywalks, visions, and the like (Pilch 2000; 2013). He introduced me to this neglected side of the New Testament, and provided me with some tools to deal with the sayings and narratives that report this kind of events. Therefore, as a token of gratitude to John, from whom I have been learning since I was a doctoral student, I offer here some thoughts about the visionary experience of Jesus and his disciples.

### The Cultural Framework

In monophasic cultures, which favor knowledge acquired in waking phases, there is only one reliable form of consciousness, the so-called “ordinary” consciousness. Consequently, visions, dreams, and other experiences that do not take place in this state of consciousness are considered exceptional. This

presupposition determines the *etic* interpretation of visions as hallucinations. In contrast, polyphasic cultures typically accept the existence of various states of consciousness, and consequently visions, dreams, and the like, belong to everyday consciousness, and can be the source of experience and knowledge. This presupposition, in turn, shapes the *emic* interpretation of visions.

To approach the phenomenon of visions in the ancient world with a respectful and critical attitude it is necessary to facilitate a dialogue between these two perspectives. John Pilch has labelled this dialogical perspective a *derived etic* perspective because in it the *etic* insight is modified in order to access a phe-

---

Santiago Guijarro, Ph.D. (Pontifical University of Salamanca, Spain), is Professor of New Testament Studies in the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical University of Salamanca, Compañía, 5 - 37002 Salamanca, Spain. E-mail: [sguijarroop@upsa.es](mailto:sguijarroop@upsa.es). In addition to his several publications in BTB, he is most recently author of *El camino del discípulo. Seguir a Jesús según el Evangelio de Marcos* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 2014), and *La primera evangelización en los orígenes del cristianismo*, (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 2016).

nomenon that is alien to our culture (Pilch 2013:1–13). This is the perspective adopted by recent studies on altered states of consciousness. Anchored in the scientific tradition of Western culture, such studies have, however, a cultural sensitivity that allows a considerate approach to visionary experiences of other cultures (Tart; Cardeña & Winkelmann).

John Pilch studied the visions reported in the Gospels as altered states of consciousness (Pilch 2013: 109–23). When approaching them from this perspective one must take into account that both the visual process and the configuration of such states have an important cultural aspect because the culture of a group shapes the complex construction process that the human brain performs in the act of seeing. It also defines the configuration of the various states of consciousness. Consequently, to understand the visions of the Gospels we should become acquainted with their cultural grammar: that is, with the motifs, forms, and expressions that those visions had in their original context.

In second temple Judaism, visions were an important part of the religious experience. There was an important visionary tradition that originated in the vision of Ezekiel (Ezek 1–3) whose goal was the *visio Dei* to which the mystical experience tended. That mystical tradition had different expressions in both Judaism and Christianity (Lieb; Pilch 2013: 30–47).

In pre-Christian Jewish tradition, Ezekiel’s vision inspired various visionary experiences. The visions described in the Book of Zechariah (Zech 1–6), for example, are most likely a recreation of that original vision. These visions, in turn, together with that of Ezekiel, seem to have influenced those described in the Book of Daniel, in the First Book of Enoch, and in the Book of Revelation (Rev 4–5). In the later Jewish tradition, this visionary trajectory received a name and acquired a cultural shape. It was known as the tradition of the *Merqabah* (Sir 49:8), the celestial chariot in which the divine throne was placed, whose vision could be experienced practising the *Ma’aseh Merqabah*, the “works of the *Merqabah*” (Lieb: 15–41; Tiemeyer: 37–44).

This visionary tradition had a decisive influence on the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic, but does not exhaust the references to which first-century Judeans could turn to construct their own visions. God had communicated with the patriarchs and prophets through dreams and visions: Genesis 15:1; Numbers 12:6; often at night (1 Samuel 15:16; Isaiah 29:7; Job 4:13) (Tiemeyer: 13–17). Some of them, Moses, for example, had experienced God’s vision in a different way

from that described in Ezekiel’s vision (Exod 24). The biblical tradition had in the first century different models to construct the visionary experience.

This visionary tradition may have played an important role in the visionary experiences of Jesus and his disciples narrated in the Gospels. To understand them in their own terms, however, it is not enough to describe the elements of the cultural grammar to which they may have resorted. It is also necessary to know the way these elements were articulated and, above all, the way in which individuals belonging to that culture used them to construct their own visionary experiences.

In this connection, Michael Leib speaks of the “visionary mode” as the means of accessing that primordial experience which transcends human understanding (Lieb: 2–3). By its very nature, this kind of experience cannot be explained with the categories of everyday experience, and for that reason it can be accessed only by recreating the reported vision. This means that any interpretation of a vision actually implied a creative appropriation of it:

These reformulations are the means by which the visionary is acculturated in a complex act of transmission. Underlying this act is a hermeneutics in which the propensity of the *Urerlebnis* to undergo transformation at every state is realized in the very act of implementing it in “knowable” form. Whether as a hermeneutics or as a poetics, that form is itself a re-enactment of the vision, one that says as much about how the re-enactment occurs as it does about the vision it seeks to elucidate [Lieb: 7].

Christopher Rowland has formulated more explicitly the consequences of this peculiar nature of the visionary experience. According to him, it is highly probable that the ancient Judeans interpreted the visions, not through an explanation of them, but by “an exegesis through imagination.” This kind of exegesis presupposes that to understand a vision it is necessary to “see” what the visionary saw. This implies a re-enactment of his experience recreating anew the experience described in the vision (Rowland: 47–50). This exegesis might be called “performative,” insofar as the act of interpreting necessarily implies having an experience of what is interpreted.

Thus, we may conclude that Jesus and his disciples had at their disposal a cultural grammar that afforded them the motives and forms to configure their visions. Moreover, their culture provided them the clues to articulate this experience as a means of accessing an altered state of consciousness. These

two indications help us to place the visions of Jesus and his disciples in their original cultural context.

### The Vision of Jesus and His Disciples in the Transfiguration

The Gospels report different visions of Jesus: after his baptism (Mark 1:10–11 & par), in the transfiguration (Mark 9:4–7 & par), in Gethsemane (Luke 22: 43–44), and on other occasions (Luke 10:18; John 6:46; 8:38). These reports of Jesus' visions come from different sources and fit well into the culture of his time. It is therefore quite plausible that Jesus may have had these types of experiences, and that he may have initiated his disciples into them. The stories and sayings that mention them are not literary formulations of theological ideas, but rather testimonies of actual experiences that should be understood in the context of the culture to which they belong.

One of the most significant visions of Jesus is the one he experienced together with his disciples during his transfiguration (Mark 9:4–8 & par). In the gospel narrative, this vision is closely related to the one he had after his baptism. In both instances, we hear the same message: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11); “This is my beloved Son; listen to him” (Mark 9:7). However, both the circumstances in which these visions take place and the elements that configure them are different.

- This new vision does not take place on the banks of the Jordan, but on a mountain, which Jesus has climbed with some of his disciples (see Mark 1:10).
- Jesus is not the only beneficiary of the vision; those who are with him are also involved in it (later tradition will picture them as those who heard the voice in the mountain: 2 Peter 1:17–18).
- In this case two important characters of Israel's past appear in the vision.
- The voice that declares the identity of Jesus does not come from the open heavens but from a cloud that overshadows them.

The content of the vision and the circumstances that surround it describe an altered state of consciousness that takes place in the context of the initiation process of the disciples who are with Jesus. The mysterious hiking of this small group to a “high mountain,” and the subsequent transformation of

Jesus that occurs before the vision prepare them to access a different state of consciousness. Consequently, the vision they experience takes place in an state in which the perception of the self and of the environment is changed (Pilch 2013: 137–42).

The most characteristic trait in this episode is the movement upwards, a movement that the narrative emphasizes telling that Jesus climbed with his disciples a “high mountain” (Mark 9:2). The model of this vision is not, then, that of the *Merkabah*, but another one that the attentive reader can identify by paying attention to the characters who appear in the vision. The appearance of Elijah and Moses is not, in fact, an unintended one. On the contrary, they play an important role in the vision. Their task is to guide those who are participating in it, because both of them were known to have benefited from a vision of God after having climbed a mountain (1 Kgs 19:9–18; Exod 24:12–18).

Traditional exegesis has noticed that in the story of the transfiguration there are clear allusions to the vision of Moses on Mount Sinai:

Like Moses, Jesus climbs the mountain, takes with him three companions whose names are mentioned (Exodus 24:1, 9). On the seventh day, God's voice is addressed to Moses. . . . The cloud (in the singular!) is, as in Exodus 24:6.16ss, a sign of God's presence. There is also an important coincidence in the fact that God's voice resonates from the cloud [Gnilka: 32].

The grammar of the vision of Jesus and his disciples is very similar. However, the experience lived by them differs from that of Moses. The differences between the two episodes have been explained in different ways. Some scholars think that the account of the transfiguration is a recreation of Exodus 24. Others suggest that the vision of Moses was recalled in order to interpret the experience of Jesus (Focant: 333–34). The re-enactment of Moses' or Elijah's vision facilitated their access to an altered state of consciousness, but did not determine what they were to experience. In the vision of the transfiguration, Jesus has a central role, because he himself, not God, appears as the object of the vision.

In any case, the most revealing aspect in the story of the transfiguration is that in it Jesus initiates his disciples into a religious practice (Destro & Pesce). The narrative highlights the stages of the initiation process. First, Jesus chooses a small group among his disciples. Then, he climbs a high mountain with them, where they are alone. In the next step, before the

vision occurs, Jesus' appearance changes in their presence, to show them how to access the altered state of consciousness. Only after these three steps are the disciples ready to experience the vision. In it, the appearance of Moses and Elijah offers them the clue to make sense of what is happening: they are having a vision like the one experienced by Moses and Elijah, but in this case, the content of the experience is not the vision of God, but the revelation of Jesus' identity.

### The Easter Visions of the Disciples

The preceding analysis of Jesus' visionary experience suggests a possible relationship with the Easter visions. The close connection of these visions with the event of Jesus' resurrection has determined the study of the narratives in which those visions are reported. In this context, the Easter visions have been explained as events closely related to the event of the resurrection, and therefore have been understood as unique experiences. Nevertheless, the fact that Jesus introduced some of his close followers to these practices suggests that these visionary experiences may have influenced their Easter visions.

The structural similarity between the story of the transfiguration and the Easter visions has been often explained by postulating a relationship the other way around, i.e. from the Easter visions to the transfiguration. According to this explanation, the transfiguration story was an appearance story that the evangelists have placed at the beginning of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (Weeden: 128–36). This interpretation, however, does not explain the differences between the two narratives (Marcus: 1118). If the transfiguration is a pre-Easter story, then we may posit that Jesus initiated his disciples into these visionary practices.

The differences between the Easter narratives should not obscure the fact that they follow the pattern of the vision in the transfiguration. This pattern has three basic traits:

- the setting that provides precise indications of time and place, as well as information about the characters involved;
- the vision in which a message or mission is communicated;
- the conclusion, which usually describes the outcome and the actions triggered by the vision.

The contexts in which the visions happen are varied (the grave, the house, the mountain, the road, etc.), as well as the circumstances in which they take place and the way they develop. However, the format of the visions is quite consistent.

This pattern shared by the Easter visions has many elements in common with the vision of Jesus and his disciples in the transfiguration. The circumstances that pave the way to the vision in the transfiguration and in the Easter appearances (climbing the mountain, going to Jesus' tomb...) prepare the disciples for that experience. In the Easter visions, as in the vision of the transfiguration, an appearance or manifestation of divine beings or of someone coming from the divine realm (Elijah and Moses, an angel, Jesus himself) takes place. They lead the seers in the new state of consciousness and help them to interpret what they see. Finally, in the vision of the transfiguration, as in the Easter visions, extraordinary phenomena happen (a cloud that overshadows them, the stone of the tomb miraculously rolled, etc.), and there is a revelation about Jesus ("He is my son," "He is risen", etc.).

We can conclude then that the Easter visions may have been patterned after the vision of the transfiguration. Now, just as this later vision can be understood as a creative re-enactment of Moses' vision on Mount Sinai, so the Easter visions can be explained as the result of experiences lived in an altered state of consciousness which the disciples would have accessed by recreating an experience like the one reported in the transfiguration story. This connection between the pre-Easter and the post-Easter visionary experiences is stressed by the fact that, according to the Gospels, Jesus announced future visions to his disciples; visions whose main content would be the glorious manifestation of the Son of Man (Mark 13:26 & par; John 1:51). As is well known, in the early Christian tradition, the "Son of Man" was a self-designation of Jesus, and so these sayings about his future coming could easily have been understood as the announcement of future visions in which Jesus will appear in glory.

An additional argument in favour of the continuity between the pre- and the post-Easter visions is the fact that Jesus initiated his disciples in other forms of contact with God, mainly through prayer. His teaching on how they should pray, as well as the imitation of his own practice, had an enduring impact on the way his followers prayed after his death. The fact that one of the most characteristic traits of Jesus' prayer, namely invoking God as his *Abba*, was preserved even in some communities of the diaspora that did not speak Aramaic (Gál 4:6; Rom 8:15) is a telling evidence of this enduring impact (Dunn 187–88).

These arguments support the assumption that Jesus may have initiated his disciples to access other states of consciousness by

means of a precise kind of vision they may have learned to re-enact. This pre-Easter practice would explain why the encounter with the Risen Lord took place primarily through visions whose basic pattern is that of the vision reported in the Transfiguration.

## Works Cited

- Cardeña, Etzel & Michael J. Winkelman (eds.). 2011. *Altering Consciousness: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*. Santa Barbara, CA/Oxford, UK: Praeger.
- Destro, Adriana & Mauro Pesce, 2006. "Continuity and Discontinuity between Jesus and Groups of his Followers? Practices of Contact with the Supernatural." Pp. 53–70 in *Los comienzos del cristianismo*, edited by Santiago Guijarro, Salamanca, Spain: Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca.
- Dunn, James D. G. 1997. *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Focant, Camille. 2004. *L'évangile selon Marc*. Paris, France: Du Cerf.
- Gnilka, Joachim, 1979. *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, EKK II/2. Zürich, Switzerland: Neukirchener Verlag.
- Lieb, Michael, 1991. *The Visionary Mode: Biblical Prophecy, Hermeneutics, and Cultural Change*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Marcus, Joel, 2009. *Mark 8–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Pilch, John J. 2013. *Flights of the Soul. Visions, Heavenly Journeys, and Peak Experiences in the Biblical World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
2000. *Healing in the New Testament. Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Rowland, Christopher, et al. 2006. "Visionary Experience in Ancient Judaism and Christianity." Pp 41–56 in *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism*, edited by April D. De Conick. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Tart, Charles T. 1975. *States of Consciousness*. New York, NY: E. P. Dutton.
- Tiemeyer, Lenna-Sophia, 2015. *Zechariah and His Visions: An Exegetical Study of Zechariah's Vision Report*. London, UK/ New York, NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
- Weeden, Theodore J. 1971. *Mark. Traditions in Conflict*, Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press.

In this article I summarize some parts of a paper presented at a conference organized by the Centre for the Study of the Gospel of Leuven. The paper will be published in: *The Gospels in Anthropological Perspective*, edited by Joseph Verheyden & John Kloppenborg (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).