

Moses the Seer in St. John Damascene's *Canon for the Transfiguration*

In his canon for the Transfiguration, St. John of Damascus (c.675-749) makes Moses a central figure for almost half of the hymn. Rather than introduce him as the Lawgiver, a common theme in sermons on the feast, the poet focuses on him as θεοπτής “the one who sees God” (5) and develops the theme through the various figures of God Moses saw. Foregrounding Moses enables the poet to pull together the Gospel narrative, the theological ramifications of the feast, and the liturgical exigencies of this hymn. A hymn written for the equivalent of Matins, *orthros*, a canon includes references (explicit or otherwise) to nine biblical odes (Ex. 15: 1-19; Deut. 32: 1-43; 1 Kings 2:1-10; Hab. 3: 1-13; Is. 26:9-20; Jon. 2:3-10; Dan. 3:26-56; Dan. 3:57-88; Luke 1:46-5, 68-79) alongside meditation on the feast, and Moses bridges the gap between the Old Testament odes and the feast day. Finally, the shadowy figures Moses encountered enhance the splendor of the Transfiguration, and keep the eyes of the faithful fixed upon it.

The presentation of Moses stands out among other discussions of the feast. Considering the Greek patristic and Byzantine homilies on the feast, such as the collection translated by Daley 2013, one finds that sermons on the feast focus mostly on the Apostles, especially St. Peter. Reading the canon against the Damascene's own sermon for the feast illuminates the differences even more. Adhrastas 2021 in fact encourages his readers to read this sermon alongside the canon, since the two complement each other; his in-depth analysis of the Transfiguration sermon is helpful for that purpose. Both Louth 2002 and Pokhilko 2004 provide helpful ode-by-ode commentary on the canon, including how each ode engages with its biblical predecessor and theological influences. Louth 2005 provides helpful context on the canon genre

(especially in contrast to the kontakion) and Petrynko 2010 traces the development of the canon from commentary to stand-alone poetry.

The acrostich to the canon for the Transfiguration summarizes the Damascene's approach to the hymn: Μωσῆς Θεοῦ πρόσωπον εν Θαβὼρ ἶδε, "Moses saw the face of God on Thabor." The Apostles take a back seat in this hymn—they are not named individually, nor given the sort of didactic treatment found in, for instance, the Damascene's sermon for the feast. Neither does the poet explain Elias' presence; he is simply a witness with Moses. Moses' role as lawgiver is not even mentioned; rather the first adjective he receives is ὁ θεόπτης, "the one who sees God" (5). The opening of the first ode, Μωσῆς ἐν θαλλασῆς, suggests a narrative about the triumph over the Egyptians at the Red Sea—only to pivot into a description of the columns of cloud and fire. This προφητικῶς "prophetic" vision of God is followed by three more—the vision of God on Mt. Sinai; the glory overshadowing the Tabernacle; the burning bush—taking up the first three odes. Throughout the poet constantly contrasts the figure with the reality, Old Testament past with the "present" of the feast. In ode 6, this theme of type and prefiguration reaches its climax as Moses, seeing Christ on Thabor, cries out, realizing that He is the fulfillment of these shadowy visions. By focusing on Moses rather than the Apostles, the Damascene can place the Transfiguration in its context in the economy of salvation, and tie together otherwise disparate stories into a cohesive whole. The emphasis on sight and visions highlights the glory of the Transfiguration and the sight of God which not even Moses could have during his lifetime. So the poet can end the canon with a call to all the faithful to ascend the Mt. Thabor of the spiritual life, and seek for this vision of Christ with all the longing of our souls.

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