

Bible Notes

The Transfiguration

Mark 9:2-7

Matt. 16:13, 16

13 When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?

16 And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

2 And after six days Jesus taketh with him Peter, and James, and John, and leadeth them up into an high mountain apart by themselves: and he was transfigured before them.

Six days after Peter's declaration that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah, Jesus led the inner core of his disciples, Peter, James, and John, high up on a mountaintop to pray. Scholars present three possible locations for this important biblical event. Since the time of Origen (185-254 CE), an early Christian writer and theologian, Mount Tabor has been cited as the Mount of Transfiguration, although recently scholars are questioning that assumption. If one were traveling from Caesarea Philippi to Capernaum, as the disciples would have done, this high hill would have been a roundabout way to travel. Today, this is the popular tourist site that most people visit. One can drive about 1,900 feet above sea level to tour the monastery on the top that marks this as the Mount of Transfiguration.

Mount Hermon, another possible choice, rises far in the distance and borders the present country of Lebanon. Its elevation is 9,232 feet above sea level and is more of a mountain than simply a high hill like Mount Tabor. Much of the time the top of Mount Hermon is under snowpack. Even though this mountain was closer to Caesarea Philippi, it would probably have been too high and too cold for the disciples to have spent the night there. It was also in Gentile territory, which many scholars believe would eliminate this location as the transfiguration site.

Some scholars today designate Mount Meron as the location of the transfiguration. It is 3,926 feet above sea level and is the highest mountain in Israel. If the disciples were on their way from Caesarea Philippi to Capernaum, this mountain would have been a conceivable stopping point. But no one knows for certain where the location was. The most important factor was that Jesus often chose to go up high when he prayed.

“He ascended the mountain to pray. Our Saviour prayed much. When he did it, he chose to be alone. For this purpose he often ascended mountains, or went into the deserts. There is something

in the solitude and deep and awful stillness of a lofty mountain favourable to devotion” (Barnes 78).

In Matthew it says that Jesus “was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light” (KJB Matt. 17:2).

The word “transfigured” signifies an invisible process that changes the outward appearance, until it shines with the resplendency of divine brightness, into the same image of excellence that shines in Christ. The face and figure shine with glory that comes from within – the glory of God bursts through the flesh or the veil of the body. It does not mean the change of the inside substance of something.

“The verb *metamorphoo* (to transfigure or transform; to change in form) suggests a change of inmost nature that may be outwardly visible. That Jesus was transfigured ‘before them’ implies that it was largely for their sakes: whatever confirmation the experience may have given Jesus, for the disciples it was revelatory” (EBC 8.385).

When Moses spoke with God on the mountaintop, he was also transfigured. His face shone so brightly that the children of Israel could not bear to look on his face. He had to wear a veil when he spoke to them. Then, he took the veil off when he returned to speak with God.

Ex. 34:33-35

33 And till Moses had done speaking with them, he put a veil on his face.

34 But when Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he took the veil off, until he came out. And he came out, and spake unto the children of Israel that which he was commanded.

35 And the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone: and Moses put the veil upon his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

3 And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them.

“The clothing of Jesus is described as *dazzling* (Greek *stribto*), in the same fashion that polished or bright surfaces were so described in classical Greek and in the LXX [i.e., the Septuagint, or the Koine Greek version of the Hebrew Bible]. *White* (Greek *leukos*) is used also of the young man at the tomb in 16:5. The phrase *with a brightness . . . equal* is peculiar to Mark and further underlines his emphasis on the heavenly glory of Jesus. The absence of any reference to the face of Jesus is strange, but there is just enough variant mss. evidence to suggest that originally the text may have read ‘his clothing became dazzling and his face white’” (AB Mark 360).

4 And there appeared unto them Elias with Moses: and they were talking with Jesus.

“ . . . we may take these two names as being the attestation of the Law and the Prophets. Moses and Elijah were both believed to have been translated to heaven” (*AB Matthew* 203). Moses was the archetypal figure in the Old Testament who represented the Law. Elijah was the prime manifestation of the Prophets, and Jesus is the prime figure in the New Testament. In reality, the whole Bible was represented on that mountaintop.

“This is the more plausible when we recall that these two figures very rarely appear together in Judaism or in the New Testament. All these associations gain importance as the narrative moves on and Jesus is perceived to be superior to Moses and Elijah and, indeed, to supersede them” (*EBC* 8.385).

The story of the transfiguration is told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but in Luke there are some interesting differences.

Luke 9:30, 31

30 And, behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias:

31 Who appeared in glory and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem.

Luke tells the reader what the topic of conversation is between Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. They speak of Jesus’ decease or *exodus* in Greek (Thayer 224). In Matt. 1:18, it says “the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise”; it is interesting that “birth” is *genesis* in Greek (Thayer 113).

Luke 9:32

32 But Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep: and when they were awake, they saw his glory, and the two men that stood with him.

The sleep that the disciples experienced is translated as *hypnos* which indicates a drug-like, almost hypnotic sleep (Thayer 642). The disciples just couldn’t comprehend what was happening with Jesus, and they seemed to “check out” of the scene. Whatever happened to Jesus during his prayer and conversation with Moses and Elijah, Jesus had to have related to them, because they were only semi-conscious.

5 And Peter answered and said to Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias.

“True to form, Peter responded impulsively. His words ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here’ show that he was greatly moved by the experience yet did not understand it” (*EBC* 8. 699).

6 For he wist not what to say; for they were sore afraid.

“This endeavor to excuse Peter’s inept remark shows Mark’s sensitive concern for Peter. He was frightened and at a loss as to what to say. So he impulsively spoke, and what he said was not worth saying” (*EBC* 8. 699).

7 And there was a cloud that overshadowed them: and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear him.

Biblically, a cloud was the symbol of the divine Presence. God went before the Israelites in a cloudy pillar, dark by day and bright by night (Ex. 14:19, 20).

The cloud, called the Shechinah, dwelt continually in the Most Holy Place in the Temple (1 Kings 8:10, 11). At times the cloud rested on the Ark and filled the Temple. At the baptism, the voice from the cloud revealed Jesus’ true identity as the very son of God, and this message came again out of the cloud on this mountaintop, revealing to those present that Jesus was indeed God’s beloved son, His chosen one!

“The Transfiguration experience was for their spiritual instruction. God’s voice spoke authoritatively out of the cloud, and this Voice assured the disciples that, although the Jews might reject him and the Romans put him to death, yet he was accepted and beloved by God” (*EBC* 8.699).

“‘Listen’ must be given its full sense of obedience. The only true listening known in the Bible is obedient listening . . . when God enjoins us to hear him” (*EBC* 8. 700).

Matt. 3:17

17 And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

The message also came to “hear ye him”, to pay attention to what he says, listen to him. He speaks with divine authority greater than even Moses and Elijah.