

The Transfiguration of Jesus

² After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them. ⁴ Then Elijah appeared to them along with Moses, and they were conversing with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, “Rabbi, it is good that we are here! Let us make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁶ He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them; then from the cloud came a voice, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.” ⁸ Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them. ⁹ As they were coming down from the mountain, he charged them not to relate what they had seen to anyone, except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰ So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what rising from the dead meant. (Mark 9:2-10)



Detail of "The Transfiguration of Jesus" by Raphael (1516-1520) | Vatican Museum | PD-US

Context

The first eight chapters of the Gospel according to Mark have been a display of the teachings, authority, and power of Jesus. These chapters include accounts of healings, casting out of demons, and the miracle feeding of more than 4,000 people – and yet the question still remains: who is this person Jesus? At Caesarea Philippi Jesus asks the disciples who the people say that he is (8:27) and receives a variety of answers: “*John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others one of the prophets.*” And then the question is turned to the disciples, “*But who do you say that I am?*” Peter said to him in reply, “*You are the Messiah.*”

Many scholars see this as a turning point in Mark in which Jesus begins to prepare his disciples for the events that will unfold in Jerusalem. It is at the revelation at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus first predicts his Passion (8:31-33) and teaches that being a true disciple means one must take up the cross daily (8:34-9:1). Soon enough there will be a second prediction of his own Passion, but before that we come to the narrative of the Transfiguration.

Commentary

“*After six days...*” is a rather precise temporal reference that is unusual in Mark. Many see a connection to Moses’ experience on Sinai (Exodus 24:15-16). There Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day the Lord called Moses from the cloud. A few scholars want to place this event six days after the Day of Atonement which is the Festivals of Booths (Tabernacles).

But the most immediate reference likely points back to the events of Caesarea Philippi and Peter’s profession of Jesus as Messiah (8:27-30), but one should also not overlook Mark 9:1, the verse immediately preceding our text: *He also said to them, “Amen, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come in power.”* This verse should really be part of Mark 8 as it is part of the complex of encouragement in the face of the Passion predictions and warnings of the necessity to take up one’s cross. The unveiling of Jesus’ glory in the presence of the three disciples corresponds to the assurance that some will indeed see.

What will they see? The transfiguration is presented as a theophany (a manifestation of God) which points to the powerful coming of the Kingdom of God. The three key visual items are that “*his clothes became dazzling white*” – a description echoing the divine in Daniel 7:9 – as well as the appearance of Elijah and Moses, representing all the Prophets and the Law, the two cornerstones of Jewish faith. The “high mountain” recalls the theophanies on the mountain of God (Sinai, Ex. 24; Horeb, 1 Kings 19) where Moses and Elijah received a vision of the glory of God. Now the theophany is given to the disciples who will carry the revelation of Christ Jesus to the world.

It is also noteworthy that a cloud envelopes Jesus, Moses and Elijah. It was a way to prepare the disciples to hear the solemn admonition that was to follow. Mark presents the cloud in the style of the OT where such a cloud indicates the presence of God (e.g. Exodus 16, 19, 23, 33) during the Exodus. The cloud (e.g. appearing on the top of Sinai) served the same purpose as the tabernacle/tent that the people were instructed to construct (Ex 25-31). It was the *meshkan*, the dwelling place of God as well as (sometimes also) *ohel mo’ed*, the meeting tent for God with the people. It is a place that both reveals and conceals God’s glory.

The ones within the tent are those with a special relationship to God. In the case of both Moses and Elijah the glory of God served to vindicate their mission during their ministries in the wilderness. This is also the function of the cloud and the heavenly voice on this occasion. When Jesus began his mission in the wilderness of Judea the voice of God declared him to be the beloved Son, the object of his elective pleasure (Mark 1:11). Now on the wilderness mountain the voice is heard again, reaffirming the Father’s approval and confirming Jesus’ dignity as the Son, even in the light of Jesus’ revelation to the disciples of what lies ahead in Jerusalem (cf. 8:31). The cloud and the solemn declaration of the voice of God affirm the same truth: Jesus is the beloved Son of God, When the cloud lifted, Moses and Elijah had vanished. Jesus alone remained as the sole bearer of God’s new revelation to be disclosed in the cross and resurrection.

What are they to understand? What purposes did this theophany serve? There are a number of possibilities. Brian Stoffregen has compiled a good list of things to consider.

- (1) ***to see the Kingdom of God coming in power.*** One purpose is that it may be the event referred to in 9:1: “*Amen, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come in power.*” These three disciples have seen the kingdom of God in all its power with the transfiguration of Jesus. Going back another verse: Jesus said: “*Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this faithless and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.*” (8:38). Do these words also

point to the transfiguration? Do all three of these references: coming in glory, coming in power, the transfiguration; preview the parousia rather than the resurrection? I think that the transfiguration indicates that Jesus is the one who contains his Father's glory and the Kingdom's power. While that was experienced in part in the past and in the present, we are waiting for it to come in its fullness.

- (2) **connects (and contrasts) Jesus with the Law and prophets.** Another purpose is to indicate that Jesus fulfills the words of the Law and prophets, represented by Moses and Elijah on the mountain. How the disciples knew it was Moses and Elijah is not a question our text answers. We are told that they are speaking with Jesus, but we aren't told what they are talking about. In addition, there were traditions about both that they had never died -- Elijah was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, (2 Kings 2:1-11) and the fact that Moses' burial place was unknown (Deuteronomy 34:5-8) led to the idea that he had been taken up by God. Origin (c.185-c.254) writes that the dispute between the archangel Michael and the devil over Moses' body in Jude 9 comes from a little treatise entitled: "The Ascension of Moses." So there was a tradition that Moses had not died. This event may also distinguish Jesus from "the prophets." The disciples had said that people think that Jesus might be one of the prophets (8:28). At the end of transfiguration, there is only Jesus. The "Law and prophets" have faded away. The one remaining is Jesus.
- (3) **points to Jesus as the one whom the prophets anticipate.** In contrast to the "law and prophets" interpretation above, others hold that it is more probable that Moses and Elijah appear in the transfiguration narrative as representatives of the prophetic tradition that, according to the belief of the early church, would anticipate Jesus. "All the prophets testify to [Jesus] (Acts 10:43). It is probably too specific to maintain that Moses stands for the law and Elijah for the prophets, because each figure was associated with both the law and prophets. According to Deut 18:15, 18, a passage that is recalled in v. 7, Moses is considered the prototype of the eschatological Prophet, and Moses is frequently regarded as the representative figure of the prophetic tradition in Judaism. Likewise, Elijah was associated with Mt Sinai (1 Kgs 19:1-9), where he also received the word of God, though in a different fashion from Moses. In Mal 4:4-6, Israel is commanded to remember the "instruction" (Heb. *torah*) of God's servant Moses. Immediately following, Elijah is introduced as the prophet who turns the hearts of people to repentance on the Day of Yahweh. The appearance of Moses and Elijah in the transfiguration narrative likely recalls this passage and their prophetic roles as joint preparers of the final Prophet to come (so Deut 18:15, 18; Mal 4:5-6). Their joint preparation for Jesus is further signified by Mark's description of them "talking with Jesus"; that is, they hold an audience with Jesus as a superior.
- (4) **connects Jesus with "mountaintop experiences" at points of discouragement.** Ched Myers (*Binding the Strong Man*) in commenting about the appearance of Moses and Elijah suggests that the two great prophets represent those who, like the disciples at this moment, beheld Yahweh's epiphany on a mountain at crucial periods of discouragement in their mission having heard the Jesus will suffer and die. In the story of Elijah, the great prophet has for his trouble become a man hunted by the authorities. He tries to flee, but is met by Yahweh who dispatches him back into the struggle (1 Kgs 19:11ff.). And in the case of Moses, he is Yahweh's envoy whose message has been once rejected by the people, and who must thus ascend the mountain a second time (Ex 33:18ff.). Both stories are clearly instructive at this point in Mark's narrative.
- (5) **Jesus: a divine being.** The dazzling white clothes indicate a heavenly, rather than an earthly being (Dan 7:9; 12:3; Mk 16:5; Mt 28:3).
- (6) **the coming martyrdom of Jesus.** Myers (*Binding the Strong Man*) indicates that garments came to symbolize the clothing of martyrs (as in the Book of Revelation, 3:5, 18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13).... We

must conclude that in the transfiguration, following as it does directly upon the first portent and teaching of the cross, Jesus' new garment is symbolic of the martyr's white robes" [p. 350].

- (7) **another indication of disciples' blindness.** The disciples, once again, are unable to fully understand what's going on. Peter says, "*It is good that we are here.*" Why is it good that they are here? Why is it good that people are at worship? Do they come to only see Jesus in all his glory and to try and capture that event with booths? Peter says, "*Let us make three tents.*" What are the *skene* (tents, booths) that he plans to have them build? The word can mean a "tent" or "temporary shelter." It can mean "tabernacle" as a worship place (the dwelling place of God in the OT). It can mean a "house" -- a permanent dwelling place. Why would these three need houses? Perhaps he wants to "house" the event so that it will last forever. Mark includes this critique of Peter: "*He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified.*" (9:6).
- (8) **the disciples hear God's declaration about Jesus.** At his baptism, only Jesus hears the words of the voice that declares Jesus to be "*My son*". Now the three disciples also hear the heavenly voice attest to this relationship. However, this knowledge didn't help them much in the garden. They fall asleep instead of praying (14:37-41). They run away, rather than follow (14:50). Hearing the witness from God didn't produce a lasting or deep faith that would see them through difficult times.
- (9) **a new commandment from God.** The voice gives the command: "*Listen to him,*" "Listen" (*akouete*) is a present imperative, implying continuing action: "Keep on listening to him" or "Continue to listen to him." God gave Ten Commands in the OT. In the NT, we have this one command. This command also recalls a word from Moses, "*The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me.... You must listen to him*" (Deut 18:15).

What are they to hear? What are they to listen to? While "all the words from Jesus" is a general answer, a more specific answer from our context is Jesus' teaching just before our text (8:31-38). In these verses, Jesus speaks words that the disciples (especially Peter) were unable to hear – the prediction of his Passion and death. Peter rebukes Jesus for talking about his Passion. Peter doesn't want to listen to such words. Peter's problem, as Jesus indicates it, "*You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do*" (8:33). The same problem might be evident in his desire to build three booths.

What is ironic, is that just before this rebuking of Peter by Jesus, Peter had made his good confession: "*You are the Messiah*" (8:29), but this knowledge about who Jesus is doesn't help Peter understand what Jesus will do – suffer, die, and be raised. Peter rebukes him. Jesus wants him "behind him" and to set his mind on divine things.

What are they to do? In a similar way, in the transfiguration, they see who Jesus is: the glorified, beloved Son of God, but this revelation doesn't help Peter understand what they should do. He wants to build booths. "His proposal to build three tabernacles evidently rests upon a misunderstanding of the significance of the situation. The desire to erect new tents of meeting where God can again communicate with men implies that Peter regards the time of the second exodus as fulfilled and the goal of the sabbath rest achieved. He is anxious to find the fulfillment of the promised glory now, prior to the sufferings Jesus had announced as necessary. His comment reflects a failure to appreciate that the transfiguration was only a momentary anticipation of the glory of the consummated kingdom. The blessings of the new age, which will be shared by all the people of God (Ch. 13:26f.), cannot be secured until Jesus has accomplished the sufferings which are integral to his appointed task, culminating in his death. Mark's explanatory comment indicates that the three disciples were quite unable to grasp the messianic significance of what they had witnessed." [Lane, 319]

Peter wants to build tents/booths. God wants him to listen. In the verses before our text, not only did the disciples turn a deaf ear to the words about Jesus' suffering, they also failed to hear his words about the subsequent resurrection.

Seeing, Hearing, Doing. Brian Stoffregen has an interesting insight:

In Exodus 33:17-23, Moses asks to be shown God's glory. God replies, "You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." Instead, God tells Moses to hide in the cleft of a rock and that he would be covered with God's hand until God has passed by. With the removal of the hand, Moses would see God's backside, but not God's face.

In the human Jesus, we are able to see God's face. The transfigured Jesus produced terror (*ekphobos* -- stronger than mere *phobos* 9:6) and the disciples were unable to relate properly to the glorified Jesus. With verse 8, we have the "ordinary" Jesus again -- one who relates to and carries on conversations with human disciples.

After weeks of miraculous healings, we return to a truth that ...in Mark the true impediments to discipleship have nothing to do with physical impairment, but with spiritual and ideological disorders: 'Having eyes can you not see? Having ears can you not hear?' (8:18).

Our faith is about proper seeing and hearing and remembering. Generally, seeing, hearing, and remembering don't produce faith, but one's belief in God can produce changes in seeing, hearing, and remembering.

A Final Reflection (from PHEME PERKINS, 632)

Despite providing the most dramatic evidence of Jesus' relationship to God of any epiphany scene in the Gospel, the transfiguration cannot override the necessity of Jesus' suffering and death. It does sharpen the paradox of the cross. Although God spared Moses and Elijah from the normal processes of death, not only does God's own beloved Son die, but also his death is at the hands of his enemies. Even the affirmations of exaltation and entry into the glory of his Father (8:38) cannot nullify the scandal of the cross. God's command to heed the word of Jesus gives his teaching the authority of divine revelation.

Christians frequently think of the divinity of Jesus in terms of heavenly glory or the triumph of the parousia without recognizing the real presence of God on the cross. We tend to think that Jesus is most clearly the Son of God in glory, not in suffering. This passage challenges us to revise our understanding of how God's presence comes to the world. The command to silence reminds Christians that glory and suffering cannot be separated. Appearances of glory do not provide evidence for God's truth. Sometimes people expect historians to describe Jesus as such an overpowering personality that others will be compelled to believe. Or they are scandalized by books that treat Jesus as someone whom the educated elite of his time would hardly have noticed. Mark warns that faith grasps hold of a different reality. Dramatic miracles and heavenly visions do not create faith. Christians know that the crucified Jesus is now risen and is exalted with God. Jesus Christ is present to believers without signs and wonders.

Although Mark never lets us forget the reality of the cross, the transfiguration also reminds us of the heavenly basis for our faith in Jesus. At Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:9-11) God declared, "You are my Son, the Beloved." The transfiguration confirms that testimony just as Jesus begins to instruct his disciples about the cross. The presence of Moses and Elijah reminds us that the death and resurrection of Jesus are the goal of the story of God's salvation in the Law and the Prophets. The God who delivered Moses and Elijah will certainly be with Jesus and his disciples. The living presence of Moses and Elijah also reminds us that Jesus is not merely a great figure from the past. The Jesus of Christian faith lives as God in a way that transcends the life of the saints in heaven. As Paul says in Romans, "*For I am*

convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38–39)

Notes

Mark 9:1 *There are some standing...come in power*: understood by some to refer to the establishment by God’s power of his kingdom on earth in and through the church; more likely, as understood by others, a reference to the imminent parousia.

Mark 9:2 *transfigured*: the Greek *metemorphothe* is the passive form indicating that the work of God is in play as the agent of revelation of the divine nature of Jesus. Interestingly, the same word is used in 2 Cor 3:18 when St. Paul writes: “*All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit.*”

Mark 9:2–8 *six days*: Mark and Mt 17:1 place the transfiguration of Jesus six days after the first prediction of his passion and death and his instruction to the disciples on the doctrine of the cross; Lk 9:28 has “about eight days.” Thus the transfiguration counterbalances the prediction of the passion by affording certain of the disciples insight into the divine glory that Jesus possessed. His glory will overcome his death and that of his disciples; cf. 2 Cor 3:18; 2 Pt 1:16–19. The heavenly voice (Mk 9:7) prepares the disciples to understand that in the divine plan Jesus must die ignominiously before his messianic glory is made manifest; cf. Lk 24:25–27. See further the note on Mt 17:1–8.

Mark 9:5 *Moses and Elijah*: They represent respectively law and prophecy in the Old Testament and are linked to Mount Sinai; cf. Ex 19:16–20:17; 1 Kgs 19:2, 8–14. They now appear with Jesus as witnesses to the fulfillment of the law and the prophets taking place in the person of Jesus as he appears in glory.

Mark 9:7 *A cloud came, casting a shadow over them*: even the disciples enter into the mystery of his glorification. In the Old Testament the cloud covered the meeting tent, indicating the Lord’s presence in the midst of his people (Ex 40:34–35) and came to rest upon the temple in Jerusalem at the time of its dedication (1 Kgs 8:10).

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