

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

---

# The Transfiguration of Jesus: The Gospel in Microcosm

---

by Allison A. Trites

---

*Professor Trites, of the Department of New Testament Exegesis in Acadia Divinity College, Wolfville, Nova Scotia, delivered this paper at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in 1975. He is best known for his important work on The New Testament Concept of Witness, published by Cambridge University Press in 1977 in its series of SNTS monographs.*

THE Transfiguration of Jesus has been the glory and the despair of New Testament commentators, both ancient and modern. As early as the second century, the Apocalypse of Peter cited the story and interpreted it in terms descriptive of Paradise and the Second Coming. The church fathers, not surprisingly, frequently resorted to allegory in attempting to make the story edifying. In the Eastern Church the Transfiguration was greatly prized, and the Feast of the Transfiguration was publicly observed on August 6th, while in the Western Church the day was not ordered for general observation until the fifteenth century. In the tradition of the Eastern Church "the story became a mystical symbol of the transformation of this world and of the world to come."<sup>1</sup>

Modern commentators have been no less perplexed. Some, notably Julius Wellhausen, Alfred Loisy and Rudolf Bultmann, have seen it as a "misplaced resurrection story"<sup>2</sup>. Others treat it as a symbolical

<sup>1</sup> D. M. Beck, "The Transfiguration," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), IV, 686. Cf. U. Holzmeister, "Einzeluntersuchungen über das Geheimnis der Verklärung Christi," *Biblica* 21(1940), pp. 200-10.

<sup>2</sup> Despite powerful objections which have been raised against this theory, it has been revived recently by C. E. Carlston, "Transfiguration and Resurrection," *JBL* 80 (1961), pp. 233-40, who cites the relevant German literature. However, as C. H. Dodd has cogently argued on form-critical grounds ("The Appearances of the Risen Christ: An Essay in Form-Criticism of the Gospels," in *Studies in the Gospels*, ed. D. E. Nineham [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1955], pp. 9-35), the misplaced resurrection theory leaves unexplained the following elements in the Transfiguration story: (1) the presence of Jesus, (2) the silence of Jesus, (3) the appearance of Moses and Elijah, (4) the impulsive remark of a bewildered disciple, and (5) the Petrine addressing of Jesus as "Rabbi". Carlston also overlooks the fact that the disciples at this time were called to obedience and silence, *not* obedience and witness.

incident which illustrates theological motifs of the Early Church.<sup>3</sup> In the twentieth century it has become fashionable to stress its eschatological character, witness Ernst Lohmeyer's commentary, *Das Evangelium des Markus*, and the work of G. H. Boobyer and A. M. Ramsey.<sup>4</sup> And orthodox defenders view it as historical and credible.<sup>5</sup> There are, perhaps, elements of truth in several of these positions. The post-resurrection glory of Jesus is anticipated in the Transfiguration, and the symbolical elements are strongly in evidence, but these do not militate against its *Sitz im Leben Jesu*. The event fits the context in each of the Synoptics, and at the same time it carries heavy theological baggage.

William Barclay is probably right when he remarks concerning the importance of the Transfiguration, "Here we have another of the great hinges in Jesus' life upon earth."<sup>6</sup> The narrative suggests that the whole event was objective,<sup>7</sup> though many modern scholars have sought to describe it simply in terms of a subjective experience

- <sup>3</sup> B. W. Bacon, "The Transfiguration Story," *AmJTh* 6 (1902), pp. 236-65, attempts to interpret the voice as a divine confirmation of Peter's authority. However, the authority of *Jesus*, not Peter, is the central issue. F. J. Badcock, "The Transfiguration," *JTS* 22 (1921), pp. 321-26, argues that the experience was visionary, and that Elijah is really John the Baptist. A. T. Fryer, "The Purpose of the Transfiguration," *JTS* 5 (1904), pp. 214-17, thinks that "St. Peter saw in the Transfiguration nothing less than the assumption before selected witnesses of both offices, priest and prophet, by the Son of Man". J. B. Bernardin, "The Transfiguration," *JBL* 52 (1933), pp. 181-189, interprets the incident as "a fiction of the later Jewish Christian community, composed as a result of the dispute with the Jews over Jesus' Messiahship". W. P. Bradley, "The Transfiguration—Credential or Answer?" *Crozer Quarterly* 12 (1935), pp. 57-76, thinks the Transfiguration originally served as the first of four possible answers to the question, "When and how did Jesus become Son of God?"
- <sup>4</sup> G. H. Boobyer, *St. Mark and the Transfiguration Story* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1942) and his article, "St. Mark and the Transfiguration", *JTS* 41 (1940), pp. 119-40; A. M. Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (New York: Greens, 1949); E. Lohmeyer, "Die Verklärung Jesu nach dem Markus-Evangelium," *ZNW* 21 (1922), pp. 185-215 and his *Das Evangelium des Markus* (Meyer Commentary, 1922), pp. 180ff.
- <sup>5</sup> H. Macmillan, "Water-Marks in the Narratives of our Lord's Transfiguration," *ExpT* 7 (1895-6), pp. 25-7, stresses the circumstantial details such as the snow, the clouds and the booths, which he thinks stress "the exact colour of the locality". Other defenders of historicity include: A. S. Martin, "Transfiguration," *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, ed. J. Hastings (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), II, 742-48; E. F. Harrison, "The Transfiguration," *BS* 93 (1936), pp. 315-30; G. B. Caird, "The Transfiguration," *ExpT* 67 (1955-6), pp. 291-94; W. L. Lane, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 314-21.
- <sup>6</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1956), p. 124.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, rev. E. F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), p. 180: "No unreality is implied in the word *horama*, for it = *ha eidon* in Mark, and . . . *hōn heōrakasin* in Luke: see Num. 24: 3, 4."

of Peter or Jesus. What are the facts of the case, and what do they mean?

The Transfiguration is recorded in Mark 9: 2-8, and in the parallel passages, Matthew 17: 1-8 and Luke 9: 28-36. It is also mentioned in 2 Peter 1: 16-21, and there is a reference to the twin themes of transfiguration and glory in 2 Cor. 3: 18. The absence of the Transfiguration from the Fourth Gospel is probably due to the fact that John presents the whole of Christ's life as a revelation of the divine glory (Jn. 1: 14; 2: 11; 7: 18; 11: 4, 40; 12: 28; 17: 4). This glory John sees most fully disclosed when Jesus dies on the cross (Jn. 7: 39; 12: 16, 23; 13: 31, 32; 17: 1).

In the Synoptics the transfiguration is plainly seen as a fulfillment of the solemn prediction of Jesus, "Truly, I say to you there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God. . ." (Mk. 9: 1; Mt. 16: 28; Lk. 9: 27). "As both the description of Jesus' *doxa* and the details of the incident make clear, this is just what they do see: Jesus in his exalted state, in glory, with Elijah and Moses."<sup>8</sup>

#### I. THE EVENT

First, let us look at the event itself. The Synoptic accounts agree in the essential details. Jesus took Peter, James and John with Him and went up a mountain. During this time a glorious transformation came over Christ, and His garments became very white. Moses and Elijah appeared on the scene, and engaged in conversation with Jesus. Peter remarked to Jesus, "It is well that we are here". Then he suggested the construction of three booths for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. However, a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice out of the cloud said, "This is my (beloved) Son . . . listen to Him". After this, they saw no one with them except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus charged them to keep what they had seen to themselves (Matthew and Mark), and they obeyed His injunction and kept silence in those days concerning the things which they had seen (Luke).

Matthew omits Mark's reference to the fuller and the bleaching process, and drops the reference to the suddenness of the looking around which followed the heavenly voice (*exapina*, Mk. 9: 8). In their place he furnishes some details of his own, probably drawing on the similar account of Moses' transfiguration in Ex. 34: 29-34. Christ's face shone "like the sun" (cf. Rev. 1: 16; 10: 1), and His garments became "white as light"; Peter prefaces his construction offer with the conditional clause "if you wish", the cloud is "bright" and the Son is described by the voice as the one "with whom I am

<sup>8</sup> Carlston, *op.cit.*, pp. 239-40.

well pleased". The disciples fall on their faces and are filled with awe, but Jesus touches them, bids them rise and shake off their fear.

Luke tells us they went up on the mountain to pray, and mentions the alteration in Christ's countenance which took place while He was praying. Luke alone uses the phrase "behold, two men", and he is the sole Evangelist who links the exit of Moses and Elijah with the eagerness of Peter to erect tabernacles. Other Lucan details are the reference to Christ's departure which was to take place at Jerusalem, the sleepiness of the disciples and their arousal to see Christ's glory and the two men standing with Him. Luke follows Mark in noting Peter's ignorance, but omits Mark's reference to the height of the mountain. Only Luke tells us the Son was addressed as "my Chosen", and he alone dates the healing of the epileptic boy "on the next day" (Lk. 9: 37).

Turning to 2 Peter, we are struck by the prominence of the interpretative element. The writer, invoking the name and apostolic authority of Peter, cites the incident

... as an eyewitness of Christ's majesty to prove (1) that Christians do not believe in myths; (2) that they believe in God's gift of honour and glory to his beloved Son, and (3) that this made more sure the prophetic words about Christ's coming. This interpretation of the story verifies the second coming of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

## II. THE TIME

In Synoptic chronology the Transfiguration occurs roughly a week after Peter's great confession. Matthew and Mark date the event "after six days", but Luke fixes it "about eight days after these sayings" (Lk. 9: 28). While different reasons have been advanced to explain Luke's divergence from the other accounts (e.g., Luke may be alluding to a "new creation" which is to be effected by Christ's death), it is quite possible that Luke may be linking several occasions together. As Dr. George Caird has shown, Luke is fond of doing just that, for by the use of the simple phrase "behold, two men" Luke makes clear a connection between the Transfiguration and both the Resurrection and the Ascension (Lk. 9: 30; 24: 4; Acts 1: 10).<sup>10</sup> The evidence for this editorial explanation of Luke's eight days appears clearer today in the light of recent work which has been done on audience criticism.

This discipline has shown us how frequently the different units of gospel tradition are identified as to their audience. In the great majority of cases the Evangelists are at pains to specify the particular audience with which Jesus was working. Sometimes it was the Twelve, sometimes the larger group of disciples, sometimes the multitudes,

<sup>9</sup> Beck, *op.cit.*, p. 686.

<sup>10</sup> Caird, *op.cit.*, p. 292.

and sometimes the hardcore opponents of Jesus—the scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Gospels reveal Jesus addressing these groups at various times, and frequently present Jesus in dialogue with several groups at the same time. This technique of audience identification seems to run through all the Gospels and the sources which underlie them, and it may be employed to good advantage here in explaining Luke's departure from the chronological setting of Matthew and Mark.

At Caesarea Philippi Simon Peter had confessed the Messiahship of Christ. In response to the direct question, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter had answered, "You are the Christ" (Mk. 8: 29 pars.). Then Jesus had charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Messiah, and had commenced instruction on the necessity of the Son of Man's suffering, rejection, death and resurrection (Mk. 8: 30, 31 pars.). This first prediction of the passion, Luke informs us, took place while Jesus was praying and "the disciples were with him" (Lk. 9: 18).

Now the audience changes, as Jesus calls to him "the multitude with his disciples", and enunciates the conditions of discipleship: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mk. 8: 34). Luke is as careful as Mark in drawing attention to the shift in audience. Formerly Jesus had been praying "alone" with the disciples, but now He was speaking to "all" (Lk. 9: 18, 23). In the previous incident Jesus had "commanded" His followers "to tell this to no one", in the latter case Jesus was spelling out the principle of sacrifice and challenging all and sundry (Lk. 9: 21, 26).

At first glance Matthew seems to fuse the two pericopes together. In both instances Jesus is talking with "his disciples", and no others are in view (Mt. 16: 13, 24). However, on closer examination we notice Matthew's characteristic use of the Greek word *tote* "as a connective particle to introduce a subsequent event, but not one taking place at a definite time".<sup>11</sup> In other words, Matthew in his own way quite clearly draws a distinction between two different events, the second of which took place some time after the first. Both he and Mark plainly link the Transfiguration with the instruction on the conditions of discipleship given six days previously. Luke, on the other hand, wants to connect the Transfiguration with two incidents—namely, the Petrine confession at Caesarea Philippi and the declaration of the principles of discipleship given somewhat later. Both of these occasions were associated with memorable

<sup>11</sup> F. Blass, A. Debrunner, R. W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 240.

teaching imparted by Jesus, and Luke desires the reader to recall all of "these sayings" (Lk. 9: 28). As an historian, he estimates the interval between the two incidents which precede the Transfiguration, adds it to the "six days" mentioned in Mark, and comes out with an approximate chronological figure, "about eight days". His alteration of Mark appears to be prompted by editorial considerations which have been brought more fully to light with the rise of redaction criticism. We now see more clearly than ever before the importance of treating each Evangelist with respect. Each Gospel writer was a theologian in his own right, and his editorial arrangement quite naturally reflected his special aims and objectives.<sup>12</sup>

### III. THE PLACE

Having examined the question of timing, we are now in a position to consider the locale. Where did the Transfiguration take place? "It is quite evident that the tradition placing the scene on the Mount of Olives must be dismissed."<sup>13</sup> It is too remote from the scene of Peter's confession, is not sufficiently "high" (only about 2720 feet), and does not do justice to the geographical setting on the fringes of Galilee (cf. Mk. 9: 30; Mt. 17: 22). As for Tabor and Hermon, while each mountain is frequently mentioned in Scripture (Tabor: Josh. 19: 22; Judg. 4: 6, 12; 8: 18; 1 Sam. 10: 3; Ps. 89: 12; Jer. 46: 18; Hos. 5: 1; Hermon: Deut. 4: 48; Josh. 13: 11; Ps. 89: 12; 133: 3; Song of Sol. 4: 8), there are several considerations which favour Hermon as a more likely site for the Transfiguration: (1) Hermon fits the topographical description more accurately as the "high mountain" described by Matthew and Mark. (Matthew's only other reference to a "high mountain" occurs in the Temptation story, Mt. 4: 8.) Hermon is over 9000 feet, while Tabor is only 1843 feet. (2) The northern site harmonizes better with the geographical data, for Caesarea Philippi is at the foot of Hermon while Tabor is a considerable distance away. Tabor is not impossible geographically, but certainly it is not probable. Moreover, no reason is given for the undertaking of such a sizeable journey. (3) Hermon was isolated and suitably remote for prayer (cf. Lk. 9: 29), but there was a walled fortress on the top of Tabor at the time of Christ as we know from Josephus (*War* ii. 20.6; iv.1.8). Moreover, Tabor was

<sup>12</sup> For a useful treatment showing the unique perspective of each Gospel see A. Feuillet, "Les Perspectives propres à chaque Évangéliste dans les Récits de la Transfiguration," *Biblica* 39 (1958), pp. 281-301. On the varied interpretations of the Transfiguration see H. Riesenfeld, *Jésus transfiguré* (Copenhagen: E. Munksgaard, 1947). For a recent popular treatment see J. W. C. Wand, *The Transfiguration* (London: Faith Press, 1967).

<sup>13</sup> W. Ewing, "Mount of Transfiguration," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. J. Orr (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939), V,3007.

understood to be associated with the Temptation in the second-century Gospel of the Hebrews. (4) A theological factor seems to favour the northern site. The territorial limits of Israel were from Dan to Beersheba (Judg. 20: 1; 1 Sam. 3: 20; 2 Sam. 3: 10; 17: 11; 24: 2, 15; 1 Kgs. 4: 25; 1 Chron. 21: 2; 2 Chron. 30: 5). Jesus deliberately goes into Gentile territory where Peter acknowledges Him to be the Messiah, as if to suggest that His Messiahship is not restricted to the Jews. (This is somewhat similar to the thought in John's Gospel, where Jesus' "hour" dawns when the Gentiles come to seek Him, Jn. 12: 20-23.) The Gospel is for all people. To sum up, we have no reason to disagree with the verdict of A. T. Robertson, who remarked concerning the fourth-century tradition of Cyril of Jerusalem and Jerome: "The tradition which places the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor is beyond question false."<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, a reasonable case can be made for Mount Hermon, the highest mountain in Gaulanitis.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps we have lingered too long on this point. Dennis Nineham, objecting to such speculation as "idle", reminds us not to lose sight of the significance of mountains in the Scriptures:

... very possibly St. Mark himself had no ideas on the subject. For him the significance of this trait in the story will have lain in the fact that a mountain top was traditionally the setting for theophanies and supernatural revelations—cf. e.g., Ex. 24 and 34; 1 Kgs. 18: 20; 19: 8, 11; Mt. 28: 16ff.; Acts 1: 12; Mk. 13: 3ff.; Mt. 5: 1, etc. Cf. 2 Pet. 1: 18, where it is called "the holy mountain."<sup>16</sup>

#### IV. THE SYMBOLISM

We turn now to consider the change which took place in the appearance of Jesus. The verb *metamorphoō* is found only four times in the New Testament, twice in connection with the mysterious change which happened to Jesus on the holy mountain (Mt. 17: 2; Mk. 9: 2), then twice of the growing moral likeness to Christ which believers are commanded to cultivate (2 Cor. 3: 18; Rom. 12: 2). Luke tells us that Jesus "went up on the mountain to pray" (Lk. 9: 28), and it was "as he was praying" that "the appearance of his countenance was altered and his raiment became dazzling white"

<sup>14</sup> A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1922), p. 122.

<sup>15</sup> One of the spurs of the Anti-Lebanon range has also been suggested. W. Ewing, *ExpT* 18 (1906-7), pp. 333-34, for instance, has suggested Jebel Jermuk, a 4000 foot mountain in Upper Galilee which stands to the west of Safed. This interpretation stresses the Jewish nature of the crowd that greeted Jesus at the foot of the mountain (note the reference to "the scribes" in Mk. 9: 14).

<sup>16</sup> D. E. Nineham, *Saint Mark* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 237.



(Lk. 9: 29). For Luke it is impossible to understand the meaning of this event apart from prayer. "While the disciples were deep in sleep, Jesus was deep in prayer."<sup>17</sup> Jesus was changed as he prayed, and Luke wishes to remind his readers that for them too, prayer can change things. Perhaps this is why the beloved physician finds Jesus praying at so many of the critical points in His career (e.g., the Baptism, Caesarea Philippi, Gethsemane, the Cross). In this as in all things, Luke implies that Jesus left His followers an example that they should follow in His steps (cf. Jn. 13: 15; 1 Pet. 2: 21).

The voice out of the cloud, so rich in Old Testament overtones, makes it crystal clear that Jesus is divinely recognized and acclaimed. He is addressed in terms which recall the Servant of the Lord of Isaiah 42: 1 and the latter-day Moses of Deut. 18: 15. These Old Testament roles are interpreted Christologically and Messianically, and related to the historical ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

There are other features about the incident which derive their significance from the Old Testament. Moses and Elijah figure prominently in the story, "appearing in glory" and speaking with Jesus (Lk. 9: 32, 31). In all three Gospel accounts these Old Testament giants appear, converse with Jesus, and then fade out of the picture, leaving Jesus alone with His three disciples (Mk. 9: 8; Mt. 17: 8; Lk. 9: 36). Moses and Elijah probably represent the Law and the Prophets witnessing to the Messiah and being superseded by Him. This interpretation helps to explain their eventual departure, a detail noted only by Luke (Lk. 9: 33). If we ask why these two Old Testament leaders appeared, it is well to remind ourselves that each of these men had enjoyed a vision of the glory of God on a mountain: Moses on Sinai (Ex. 31: 18) and Elijah on Horeb (1 Kgs. 19: 8). In addition, each of these men had no known grave (Deut. 34: 6; 2 Kgs. 2: 11), and in the closing verses of the Old Testament the law of Moses and the coming of Elijah are mentioned together (Mal. 4: 4-6). The broader context of the Gospels seems to shed further light on the appearance of these two figures, for in each Synoptic Gospel a subsequent reference is made to one or the other of these men. Moses could not cure hardness of heart (*sklĕrokardia*, Mk. 10: 5; Mt. 19: 8) and Elijah could not conquer vindictiveness (Lk. 9: 54); only in the person and work of Christ did mankind receive God's final word for the human predicament (Heb. 1: 1-3; 7: 25; 9: 14; cf. Mt. 5: 21f., 27f., 31f., 33f., 38f., 43f.).

The subject of their conversation is the *exodus* which Jesus is to

<sup>17</sup> J. Matheson Forson, "The Transfiguration," *ExpT* 17 (1905-6), pp. 140-41, who adds: "And as if they had seen what their eyes could not appreciate at that time, namely, the Christ of God in prayer, they were told, 'tell the vision to no man until the Son of Man be risen from the dead' (Mt. 17: 9)."

accomplish at Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup> (His *eisodos* is described in Acts 13: 24.) This seems to be a deliberate reference to Israel's experience under Moses. The first Exodus was out of bondage in Egypt; the second Exodus was out of bondage in sin. The former deliverance was effected by Moses; the latter by Jesus of Nazareth. Freedom from Egyptian slavery came through the "death" of the Red Sea (lit., Sea of Reeds, Ex. 15: 22); freedom from slavery to sin came through the death of the Cross. In that sense the water "baptism" under Moses prefigured the blood "baptism" of Golgotha (1 Cor. 10: 1-2; Lk. 12: 50). In view of the description of Jesus' death as an *exodus* it is worth studying 2 Peter 1: 15ff., where the same word is used to describe Peter's own death. The other New Testament reference is also instructive, where Joseph on his deathbed makes mention of the *exodus* of the sons of Israel and gives orders concerning his bones (Heb. 11: 22).

The cloud imagery is another prominent element in the Transfiguration narratives, and seems to symbolize the divine presence (Ex. 24: 15-18; Ps. 97: 2). Certainly it is significant that there is a cloud to receive Christ out of His disciples' sight at the Ascension (Acts 1: 9) and the return of Christ will be with clouds (Rev. 1: 7). While both Matthew and Mark lay stress upon the brightness which issued from Christ (Mt. 17: 2; Mk. 9: 3), Matthew alone mentions the brightness of the overshadowing cloud (Mt. 17: 5). Professor Moule was surely right when he called attention to the use of the cloud terminology in vindicating the one thus honoured.<sup>19</sup> So Jesus, the prisoner in the dock, stands before Caiaphas and company who serve as His accusers and judges, but one day the roles will be reversed when His enemies see the Son of Man "coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mk. 14: 62). Then the condemned one will be finally vindicated and judge His earthly accusers. Here too the reference to the cloud terminology prepares the way for the statement of divine approval of the Son.

The three companions who accompany Jesus are His closest friends and associates—Peter, James and John. They had been called from time to time, to share many of Christ's most moving experiences. They had accompanied their Master when He had restored Jairus's daughter (Mk. 5: 37; Lk. 8: 51), and they would be sleepy partners with their Lord in Gethsemane (Mk. 14: 33; Mt. 26: 37). Here, Peter and his companions awoke out of "a deep sleep"

<sup>18</sup> Cf. R. E. Nixon, *The Exodus in the New Testament* (London: Tyndale Press, 1963). On 2 Pet. 1: 15 see R. Holmes, "The Purpose of the Transfiguration," *JTS* 4 (1903), p. 547, who remarks: "St. Peter had learnt so to revise his estimates of things that he could now speak of Death not as the dreaded enemy, but as the harbinger of *exodus*."

<sup>19</sup> C. F. D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament* (London: S. C. M. Press, 1967), pp. 82-99.

(Lk. 9: 32, NEB); possibly it was the combination of the glory light and the sound of voices which caused them to stir. Their weariness was forgotten in the sense of excitement that gripped them. The full import of the situation probably did not dawn on them for some time.

Quick to react to this extraordinary situation, Peter sought to express his feelings (Mk. 9: 5). Two of the Evangelists add the comment that he did not know what he was saying (Mk. 9: 6; Lk. 9: 33). Perhaps Peter had the impression that the heavenly visitors might linger for some time, in which case a shelter should be provided for them as well as for the Lord. Perhaps the intense light, the appearance of the two distinguished figures from the past, and his own hopes for Jesus as the Messiah of Israel could have led Peter in a sudden outburst to declare that the kingdom could not long be delayed. There is even the possibility that the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths was then being celebrated in Jerusalem. As that festival drew to a close, its messianic aspect was magnified (cf. Jn. 7: 2, 10, 37-41).

As though in answer to Peter (who according to Matthew and Luke was still speaking), a cloud appeared and overshadowed the company, and a voice was heard acclaiming Jesus as God's beloved Son. In all three Synoptists the *Bath-qol* repeats (with slight variations) the words of the heavenly voice at the Baptism, "This is my (beloved) Son," but with the significant addition, "listen to Him". The voice from the cloud attests Jesus as the promised prophet like unto Moses, unto whom God's people must hearken.

Clearly Peter was being subjected to censure. Whether he realized it or not, he was guilty of putting Jesus on the same plane as these Old Testament servants of God. To be sure, God had spoken in the past to the fathers through the prophets, but now He was speaking definitively through a Son (cf. Heb. 1: 1-2; 3: 1-6). The difference must be understood and heeded. The heavenly voice bade Peter and the others to hear the Son, that is, in the sense of heeding Him. What Peter must do is to pay attention to the work of his Master. Apparently Moses and Elijah had done so, so should not the disciple and his companions? Other revelations of the Cross would come. Let these men be sure that they did not close their minds to such instruction. "The Son of Man *must* suffer".

#### V. THE MEANING

Now let us turn to consider the meaning of the experience as a whole. First, we must note what it meant for Jesus,<sup>20</sup> a feature to

<sup>20</sup> Fryer, *op. cit.*, has stressed this aspect. Cf. A. B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), pp. 183-91.

which Luke directs our attention. It was a divinely given sign that the path of obedience to which Jesus had dedicated Himself at His baptism was indeed the right one (cf. Jn. 12: 28). At the Temptation our Lord had refused to take any satanic shortcuts to fulfill His Messiahship. Again and again He had answered the Tempter, "It is written" (*gegraptai*, Mt. 4: 4, 6, 7; Lk. 4: 4, 6; cf. *eirētai*, Lk. 4: 12). He saw His path cut out for Him in the Scriptures, and would not deviate from it, even for all the "glory" of the world (Mt. 4: 8; Lk. 4: 6). The earthly kingdoms might offer authority and power, but for the Son of Man the "glory" was to be perfected by means of a painful decease in Jerusalem (Lk. 9: 32, 31). The road ahead, He declared at Caesarea Philippi and on subsequent occasions, would run through suffering and death, but it would lead to ultimate triumph and vindication. He was assured of the Father's approval of His *modus operandi*, and could go forward in confidence. His prayer was abundantly answered. The need of Christ for human fellowship also shines through the story:

The three disciples who accompanied Jesus are those who were with Him also in Gethsemane. Since on the latter occasion this inner circle of friends was chosen by Jesus to watch with Him through His night of prayer and to sustain Him by their presence through His Agony, it is a reasonable inference that the Transfiguration was for Jesus a critical moment in His career when He felt a similar need of companionship.<sup>21</sup>

For the three disciples, the Transfiguration was both spiritually and literally a mountaintop experience.<sup>22</sup> "Before Jesus suffered, to prepare the innermost circle of disciples to bear it, they were given the vision of His glory and the assurance of the divine authority of the Christ, 'my son, my chosen one.'" <sup>23</sup> With unmistakable clarity

<sup>21</sup> Caird, *op.cit.*, p. 291.

<sup>22</sup> W. L. Groves, "The Significance of the Transfiguration of our Lord." *Theology* 11 (1925), pp. 86-92, has vigorously opposed the notion that the Transfiguration was for the benefit of the disciples on three grounds—namely, "the apparent absence of any critical occasion, the contradiction presented to our Lord's method of training His disciples, and their ignorance of its occurrence." But the first of these objections is groundless in view of the Synoptic connections with the events of the previous week which we have observed the Evangelists have underscored with meticulous precision. The second objection ignores the fact that Jesus was acted upon in this experience: He was transfigured (*metemorphōthē*). The third objection was only partially valid from the start and held force for a short time only, and must not be unduly pressed, as Peter later is cited as publicly relating his experience after the Resurrection (2 Pet. 1: 16-18). The supposed cumulative force of Groves' argument breaks down upon careful examination. This is not a case of an either/or, but a both/and. The Transfiguration was significant to both our Lord and His disciples.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Gore, "The Gospel according to St. Luke," *A New Commentary on Holy Scripture*, ed. C. Gore, H. L. Goudge and A. Guillaume (London: S.P.C.K., 1951), p. 222, who quotes Leo the Great: "In transfiguratione illud principaliter agebatur ut de cordibus discipulorum scandalum crucis tolleretur."

the apostolic trio saw Jesus divinely endorsed as the promised Deliverer of His people: "They saw his glory" (Lk. 9: 32). Matthew follows Mark in stressing the great meaning this experience had for the privileged witnesses: "He was transfigured *before them*." "There appeared to *them* Moses and Elijah." "A (bright) cloud overshadowed *them*." In other words, they "were with Him on the holy mountain", when "He received honour and glory from God the Father" (2 Pet. 1: 17); they were, in fact, "eyewitnesses (*epoptai*) of his majesty" (2 Pet. 1: 16). Both Mark and Matthew are at pains to draw attention to the numinous, emotionally charged atmosphere. Mark bluntly states that the disciples "became terrified", and mentions the psychological reaction to account for Peter's rash suggestion (*ekphoboi gar egenonto*, Mk. 9: 6). Matthew, in a probable allusion to Sinai (Ex. 19: 16) and the transfiguration of Moses (Ex. 34: 30), relates the fearful reaction of the disciples to the heavenly voice which proclaims the Father's beloved Son: "And when the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were much afraid" (*ephobethesan sphodra*, Mt. 17: 6). Matthew also notes a detail which has taken on fresh significance in the light of recent studies in body language and touch therapy: "Jesus came to them and touched them, and said, 'Arise, and do not be afraid'" (Mt. 17: 7). Christ met them at their point of fear, and helped them to come to grips with it. This was not the only occasion when Jesus had chosen to take His closest friends with Him, but it was an unforgettable experience: "We ourselves," declares the author of 2 Peter, "heard this utterance made from heaven, 'This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased'" (2 Pet. 1: 18, 17).<sup>24</sup>

For other believers the Transfiguration is also important. It marks a vital stage in the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. In a very real sense, it presents the gospel in microcosm. It points back to the Baptism, and looks forward to the Cross, Resurrection, Ascension and Parousia, so it is one of those turning points which have a great interest for New Testament theology and particularly for an understanding of the kingdom of God. It looks back to the Old Testament and shows how Christ fulfills it, and it anticipates the great redemptive acts which bring the gospel story to its climax and fulfillment.

As far as its devotional significance is concerned, if we take seriously our Lord's dictum that "a disciple is not above his teacher"

<sup>24</sup> H. A. A. Kennedy, "The Purpose of the Transfiguration," *JTS* 4 (1903), pp. 270-73, has argued that the purpose was to teach the disciples a lesson on the Resurrection. However, the post-Easter appearances of Jesus do not support Kennedy's theory that the Transfiguration made it easier to recognize Jesus after the Resurrection, as R. Holmes has shown, "The Purpose of the Transfiguration," *JTS* 4 (1903), pp. 543-47.

(Mt. 10: 24; Lk. 6: 40; cf. Jn. 13: 16), the Transfiguration is a reminder that for us, no less than for Jesus, the elements of suffering and glory are inextricably conjoined. The "sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow" are all of a piece (cf. 1 Pet. 1: 11). No cross means no crown. Suffering and sacrifice are the indispensable ingredients in discipleship: "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14: 22; cf. Mt. 10: 38; 16: 24; Lk. 22: 28, 29; 2 Tim. 2: 12; 3: 12). The Servant Church is to follow her Servant Lord in a costly, radical obedience, but as she does so, she may be confident of the divine approval and blessing.<sup>25</sup> The 1928 Prayer Book of the Church of England has captured the spirit of the event well and transformed it into a fitting Collect for the Feast of the Transfiguration, a festival which has been observed in the Eastern Church from the eighth century. The Collect reads:

O God, who before the passion of thine only-begotten Son didst reveal His glory upon the holy mount, grant unto us thy servants, that in faith beholding the light of His countenance, we may be strengthened to bear the cross, and be changed into His likeness from glory to glory; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.<sup>26</sup>

I would submit that in the Transfiguration we are shown the gospel in microcosm. As Professor Caird has finely put it:

... a satisfactory explanation of the Transfiguration must do justice to its connexion with the Baptism, Caesarea Philippi, Gethsemane, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the Parousia; and with the persecution of the disciples and their share, present, and future, in the glory of the risen and ascended Christ. Nor must we forget that, with all its associations, the Transfiguration had an importance of its own as a crisis in the life of Jesus.<sup>27</sup>

*Acadia Divinity College, Wolfville, Nova Scotia*

- 25 A. E. Burn, "The Transfiguration," *ExpT* 14 (1902-3), pp. 442-47, thinks of the Transfiguration as: (1) the reward of sinlessness, (2) as teaching the secret of progress, (3) as conveying a message of transcendent hope.
- 26 B. MacNutt, *The Prayer Manual* (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co. Ltd., 1954), p. 121, no. 449.
- 27 Caird, *op.cit.*, p. 292. Cf. W. C. Braithwaite, "The Teaching of the Transfiguration," *ExpT* 17 (1905-6), pp. 372-75.